

On cuts, voters can see the bigger picture

By Lord Ashcroft, KCMG

Anyone listening to the BBC's coverage of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review could be forgiven for thinking that all civilised life was about to come to an end. One after another, lobby groups and special interests dependent on the state's borrowed money are wheeled out to explain why they should be exempt from the squeeze. They sometimes admit that spending has to be cut – just cut from somewhere else. Undoubtedly some decisions will be painful and important services will have to find difficult savings.

But the evidence is that beyond Westminster and the broadcasting studios, people are rather more stoical and realistic about the cuts than most news reports would lead you to believe. A poll last weekend found people precisely equally divided over whether the spending cuts and tax rises were "right" or "wrong".

The poll also found, as did an ICM poll two days later, that while just under half think the cuts go too far, nearly as many think the balance is about right or that the cuts don't go far enough. Certainly most people are not enthusiastic about the cuts – it would be amazing if they were – but they know the state the country's finances are in and they know something has to be done about it.

Research I conducted a few weeks ago found that solid Labour voters think people will be so horrified by the cuts that Ed Miliband will win the next election almost by default. Don't be so sure. Most swing voters, who had voted Labour previously but not in 2010 - precisely the people they need to win back if they are going to return to government - thought the Coalition's cuts were unavoidable. What is more, they held Labour responsible for getting the economy into its precarious position. More recent polls also show that more blame Labour for the cuts than blame the current Government.

People are concerned, though, that the cuts may hurt the most vulnerable more than they should – recent Populus, ICM and YouGov polls have all found a majority saying the Government's plans are unfair. This is an area where Labour could capitalise – but only if they offer an alternative. So far, we are still waiting. Mr Miliband says he agrees the deficit needs to be tackled and he will not simply oppose every cut, but we have yet to hear which ones he supports.

At last week's Prime Minister's Questions he opposed the Coalition's plan to end the current system of Housing Benefit, which allows claimants to live in locations and properties that most working people could never afford. If that is anything to go by, we will have to wait some time for him to face up to reality. Until he does, voters who know the deficit must be dealt with will find it hard to take him seriously, even if they are concerned about the way the cuts will be implemented.

Although they dominate political coverage, the cuts are not everything. In politics it is the big picture that matters, and this too should warn Labour against complacency. Populus found a majority thinking that in the long run, the Government's plans will put the economy on a stronger footing.

People were far less pessimistic about the prospects for themselves and their family than they were for the country as a whole. David Cameron, George Osborne and Nick Clegg were much more trusted to run the economy than Mr Miliband and Alan Johnson. And despite his demonisation in some parts of the media, ICM found many more people thinking Mr Osborne was doing a good job than a bad one.

People know government is about taking tough decisions – and they know why these decisions are needed now. The Coalition should stick to its guns.