

Inside the minds of citizens

Interpretations of today's
social contract in France
and the UK



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Executive summary

In [Towards a 21st Century Social Contract](#), we at [IDDR](#) and the [Hot or Cool Institute](#) argued that we are in need of a new eco-social contract, fit for the 21st century. This would better help us develop agreements or compromises, and devise solutions to address social and ecological challenges. In that report, we proposed a definition of the modern Western social contract and a framework for understanding the present-day social contract in terms of four pacts (Democracy, Security, Work and Consumption).

In this report, we present new qualitative research we have conducted to better understand how the concept of the social contract resonates with citizens. Is the contractual logic familiar? How are the four pacts perceived? What matters most? And what types of narratives have the interviewees assimilated throughout their lives? The aim, then, was to use the material obtained to test and improve our framework, and to look ahead to the next stage of our exploration – namely the deliberation and negotiation of a new social contract.

Methodologies

To carry out this work, we used two methodologies: a series of four, 1.5 hour focus groups with six to eight participants in four locations across the UK (North London, South London, Bridgend, Sheffield); and a series of 20 1.5-hour semi-structured interviews with a variety of people living in France. The first methodology had the advantage of focusing discussions on collective rather than individual issues, and confronted citizens with the need to find a compromise over and above any differences of opinion, identity and social practice. The second allowed us to take a closer look at people’s life courses and the way in which the promises of the social contract were lived out. Together, these two approaches indicate what form the social contract takes in the intimate lives of individuals, and provides some clues about how to use this contractual approach in collective deliberation.

Summary of key insights

	France - Interviews	UK - Focus groups
General key-insights	There is a contractual vision of our social, political and economic life;	Clear priorities could be identified by the participants in terms of expectations and obligations;
	The widespread feeling that the contract is not being respected or is even being breached.	Environmental issues considered more in terms of citizens’ obligations than expectations from government;
Work Pact	Work, the key to social life, but undermined by employment conditions;	Obligations frequently framed in terms of cost-savings;
	Work as a place of recognition and humanisation.	Public services central to both expectations and obligations.
		The Work Pact is central to the social contract.

	France - Interviews	UK - Focus groups
Consumption Pact	<p>Consumption: a source of individual wellbeing and collective prosperity, and a means of "living well";</p> <p>A Consumption Pact where many feel they lack true autonomy.</p>	<p>Consumption Pact: the government is primarily seen as responsible for protecting citizens from the cost of living crisis.</p>
Security Pact	<p>A feeling of physical and social insecurity;</p> <p>Faced with uncertainty, a strong attachment to the collective and a demand for individualised support and assistance.</p>	<p>A Security Pact that stretched from physical security to health protection.</p>
Democracy Pact	<p>The Democracy Pact goes far beyond institutions and constructs expectations in many spheres of social life;</p> <p>Voting is seen as a duty, but expectations of democratic representation are high.</p>	<p>The Democracy Pact is defined more by fairness and accountability, than actual voice;</p> <p>Respect as an alternative perspective on the Democracy Pact;</p> <p>Mixed opinions on inequality and poverty reduction.</p>

Modifications of our initial framework

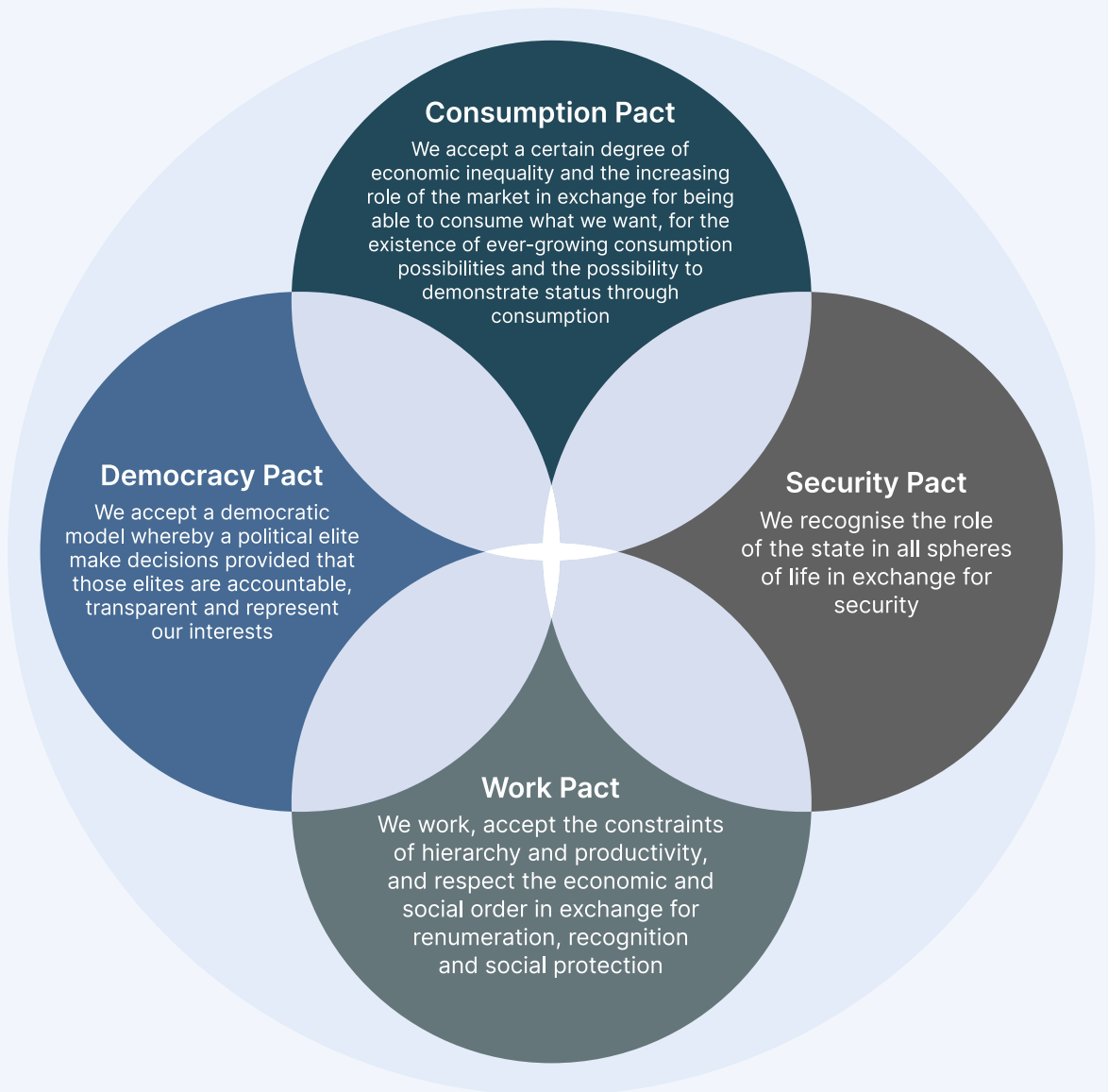
The conversations we had allowed us to test and improve the pacts that we had initially developed theoretically and through historical analysis. Two of the pacts remain effectively the same, but we propose the following new formulations for the current Consumption Pact and the Democracy Pact.

	Consumption Pact	Democracy Pact
Initial formulation	<p>"I accept a pervasive consumer pressure and a degree of inequality in exchange for the possibility to enhance [their] well-being and for the prosperity of society."</p>	<p>"I forfeit having a direct political voice, in exchange for the possibility to elect representatives and for a society based on common laws."</p>
↓	↓	↓
New formulation	<p>"We accept a certain degree of economic inequality and the increasing role of the market in exchange for being able to consume what we want, for the existence of ever-growing consumption possibilities and the possibility to demonstrate status through consumption."</p>	<p>"We accept a democratic model whereby a political elite make decisions provided that those elites are accountable, transparent and represent our interests."</p>

We also propose replacing the initial 'I' in all the Pacts with a 'We', because these practices (working, being protected, being a democratic citizen, consuming) all refer to collective processes and arrangements, and they indicate reciprocal acts (transactions).

As with our first report, we highlight that these formulations are intended to describe the current social contract, and not a desirable new social contract.

A legacy of the past: representation of the current social contract (in Western European democracies)



Challenges and opportunities

While it was not our primary aim, the conversations provided some clues as to the opportunities and challenges we face in moving to a new social contract:

Opportunities

- **A widespread feeling the current contract is not being respected**, which fuels dissatisfaction and therefore the possible desire to elaborate a new social contract.
- **People still have a “sense of the collective”** and are concerned about inequalities.
- **Work** is seen as a key source of **recognition and status**, and citizens have a sense of what work is valuable to society.
- Expectations regarding **security cover many areas**: they go beyond law and order, and can be extended to security against climate risks.
- **People have a strong attachment and high expectations of public services**, ensuring they play a key role as institutions of the social contract, and as a factor of belonging and democratic inclusiveness.

Challenges

- **Resistance to policies that are seen as taking away freedom**; but citizens acknowledge that it is appropriate for freedoms to be restricted if they harm others or undermine certain issues of justice.
- **The feeling that some people receive too much**. Scarcity and erosion of public services and resources generate a feeling of social competition. Formalising a system of fair compensation and recognition for all is then an essential prerequisite to the discussion as such of an ecological contract.
- **People still see consumption as a route to happiness and a source of individual wellbeing**. A new social contract will require a reformulation of what counts as wellbeing and a reflection on how other pacts contribute to it.

Lessons for future deliberation

Aside from the content of the conversations, we also learned a lot about what *processes* work.

- **Citizens understand the concept of a social contract**, and it's a good notion for getting into the debate about our collective agreements.
- Participants are more easily able to reflect on their understanding of the social contract **when asked to draw from lived experience**.
- **Participants require encouragement to move past the negative** and on to the successful aspects of the social contract.
- **Group discussion is recommended** to bring out the collective dimensions of our expectations and practices.
- Some Pacts (Consumption, Democracy) require **more targeted probing** than others and we, IDDRI and Hot or Cool, propose specific approaches to doing so.
- To **make visible the economic realities** that underpin the social contract, **specific tools** and resources are required.

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1. Introduction

As the latest IPCC report has shown, humanity currently seems incapable of addressing the multiplicity of environmental crises it faces.¹ Solutions do exist, in terms of new technologies, lifestyles and economic systems,² but it appears that social and political challenges are holding us back from enacting them.

In our first report on this theme, [Towards a 21st Century Social Contract](#), we at [IDDRI](#) and the [Hot or Cool Institute](#) argued that a new social contract, fit for the 21st century, is needed to help us develop agreements or compromises on solutions that respect the interests of different social groups. In that report, we proposed a definition of the modern Western social contract and a framework for understanding the present-day social contract in terms of four pacts (Democracy, Security, Work and Consumption). We then traced its modern history in two countries (France and the UK).

In this report, we present the results of two ground-breaking studies that explore citizens' perceptions of the current social contract – a series of semi-structured interviews in France, and focus groups in the UK. The objectives of these studies were threefold:

To test whether the four pacts identified in the first report as reflecting the current social contract resonated with the public, and explore how this representation could be developed.

To understand how our current social contracts are perceived by citizens, and what narratives feed into them.

To learn how conversations about these topics can be had with citizens, informing future citizen engagement.

Although we have not defined what a future social contract should look like, the findings also allow us to begin to consider how consistent citizens' current expectations and sense of obligations are with a social contract that allows us to achieve good lives within environmental limits. This helps define some of the challenges we face and opportunities available to us in moving towards a new eco-social contract.

Methodologies

In the first report, we reviewed the development of the social contract in two countries – the United Kingdom and France – which experienced quite different trajectories in terms of their political systems but have economic and demographic similarities. To build on these historical analysis conducted, these two countries were also the loci of our empirical work.

We explored two methods of investigation and assessed the relevance and utility of each, in the knowledge that the subject of the 'social contract' is not easy to explore. In the United Kingdom, focus groups were used. This method has the advantage of focusing discussions on collective rather than individual issues, and confronts citizens with the need to find a compromise over and above any differences of opinion, identity and social practices.

In France, a series of semi-structured interviews were undertaken. This method complements that of the focus groups, as it provides access to the level of 'individual' experience (but embedded in collective mechanisms), and measures the gap or alignment between personal expectations created and maintained by collective promises and narratives (meritocracy, promise of social ascension, right to work, etc.), and life experience. The level of disappointment, satisfaction or disillusionment is therefore an indicator of the way in which different social groups relate to the social contract.

1 IPCC, 2023: *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report*. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, pp. 35-115, doi: [10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647](https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647)

2 We at [Hot or Cool](#) and [IDDRI](#) have laid out proposals, as have other initiatives such as the [Wellbeing Economy Coalition](#) and [Earth4All](#).

2. Key insights from the focus groups in UK

Methodology

Four focus groups with six to eight participants were conducted in four locations across the UK:

- North London (Hendon)
- South London (Twickenham)
- Bridgend, Wales
- Sheffield, Yorkshire

Participants (28 in total) were recruited by a market research company and were chosen to represent a broad range of socioeconomic statuses, ages and political opinions. They were told that they would be discussing “people’s expectations of government and our duties towards society as people living in the UK (particularly in terms of work, democracy, safety and how we spend our money)”. They were paid for their participation.

Two central questions were asked during the focus groups:

- What do you expect the state to provide, ensure or do for people who live in the UK?
- What duties and obligations do we have as people living in this country towards the government or society as a whole?

Focus groups lasted 1.5 hours. After an ice-breaker and introductions, the concept of the social contract was introduced. The focus group was then divided into two halves. First participants considered their expectations from the state. They were invited to reflect individually, brainstorming possible expectations on Post-it notes, before discussing and prioritising these expectations on pre-prepared flip charts in breakout groups of 3-4 participants. After discussion in plenary, the same structure was used to think about and discuss duties and obligations. Both the recordings and the flipcharts were used to write up the results.

1. Clear priorities could be identified by the participants in terms of expectations and obligations

For each group, themes were scored based on where participants placed them on the flipchart, with a maximum score of 3 points if the theme was seen as a top five priority, down to 1 point if the theme was mentioned but not included on the group's final flipchart.

The table below shows the scores for the highest scoring themes for expectations and obligations:

Expectations		Obligations	
Theme	Score	Theme	Score
Healthcare	24	Respect others	22
Security	20	Protect environment	20
Education	19	Obey law	20
Housing	17	Pay taxes	20
Welfare / Benefits / Social services	14	Volunteer / support community	16
Reduce cost of living	9	Self-care	15
National defence	9	Take care of children / elderly	12
Limited/fair taxation	7	Vote	11
Sustainability / clean environment	7	Share knowledge	9
Tackle poverty / homelessness	6	Don't abuse public services	8
Transparency / Accountability	6		
Reduce inequality	6		
Public transport	6		
Cross-party collaboration	6		
Stable economy	6		

With regards to expectations, four themes stood out as most important to participants: **healthcare**, **security** (i.e. crime reduction), **education** and **housing**. These were at least twice as important as most other themes. Healthcare gained the maximum score of 24/24 meaning that it was seen as a top five priority by all groups. The following quotes provide an insight into the most important expectations mentioned:

Healthcare

“ There’s a lot of things on the NHS that’s free, that there’s certain things you have to pay for, [but] ... should be free. ”

— M, Hendon³

“ If you don’t invest [in health] from a young age, you’re just creating problems. ”

— F, Sheffield

Security

“ If we’re not safe and we’ve got crime and everything then there’s no point having education is there? ”

— F, Twickenham

Education

“ I think they should be teaching things like life skills [like mortgages] in schools rather than PSHE⁴ and religion. ”

— M, Sheffield

“ Education should be equal and free for everyone. ”

— F, Twickenham

Housing

“ Someone’s bought a load of them [properties] and renting them out for like double the price. So I don’t think that’s fair. ”

— M, Bridgend

As can be seen, four obligations scored highest and were mentioned in all or almost all break-out groups. Overall, there was more consistency of obligations than expectations, or at least it was easier to group them into consistent groups, with only 20 obligations mentioned overall (compared to 35 expectations).

Respect

“ That [respect] should go in the middle because it shapes society. ”

— F, Bridgend

Environment

“ Use solar panels, use renewable energy... Overall it will help everyone. It will help people, it will help government, it will help nature as well. ”

— M, Twickenham

Obeying the law

“ I’d say one of the ones that I think should go in the middle is the law. ”

— M, Hendon

Taxes

“ Paying taxes, I think without that there’s nothing you can do. ”

— M, Twickenham

3 F = female participant; M = male participant

4 Personal social and economic education is a feature of the curriculum in the English education system.

2. The Work Pact is central to the social contract

In the Work Pact, citizens are hypothesised to accept the constraint of hierarchy and productivity, and respect the economic and social order in exchange for remuneration, recognition and social protection.

The obligations involved in this Pact often did not emerge explicitly from participants spontaneously. One might speculate that this is because facilitators asked about obligations to the state or society, rather than towards employers or because the research was introduced under the term '**social** contract'. Working only emerged spontaneously as an obligation in one focus group.

However, much of the discussions during the focus groups presupposed an obligation to work and a sense of disapproval toward those who did not work, or chose not to work. For example, it was considered important that the state provide childcare for those who work, and it was seen as unfair if those who don't work received childcare more easily.

"So people on benefits, they get things: free childcare, free meals, free nursery and I'm working back and forth two jobs, have two children and [for me] everything costs ... and I have to pay from my own pocket."

— F, Sheffield

For some participants, it was considered to be unfair that people who worked were taxed at a high rate.

In the one discussion on immigration, participants stressed that they had no problems with immigrants who came and worked, but were unhappy about immigrants who came to claim benefits.

"I went to Australia... they welcome anybody into the country. The more the merrier..."

— F, Sheffield

"If you're going to work, then yeah."

— M, Sheffield

One participant described the role of work in our society quite eloquently:

"We're a capitalist country that teaches us from childhood 'work hard to have a good life.'"

— F, Twickenham

As such, the obligation to work was deeply embedded in the participants' model of the social contract. Whilst the above participant talked about the expectation to work hard, when specifically asked, most participants rejected the idea that citizens have a duty to work full-time as opposed to part-time. Furthermore, specific obligations around accepting hierarchy were not discussed.

The expectation of social protection was explicit in terms of expectations of welfare and benefits. The expectations of remuneration and recognition on the other hand were more implicitly reflected with statements suggesting that those who *don't* work deserve less recognition and less financial comfort.

As such, one can see that this Pact was broadly supported by the focus groups, albeit the nature of the questions asked meant that it was often supported implicitly rather than explicitly.

3. A Security Pact that stretched from physical security to health protection

We defined the Security Pact as recognising the role of the state in all spheres of life in exchange for security. Broadly speaking, this Pact was well supported by the focus groups. As we have mentioned, obeying the law was one of the top four obligations mentioned, and reflects the state's role in defining law. There was less unanimity in terms of accepting the state's role in shaping

other aspects of our life, for example education or health. Some participants resisted the notion that the state can stop us smoking, or home-schooling our children.

"I don't want the state to start controlling me and saying if I can smoke or not. Already they say we can't smoke inside and that's understandable because it's affecting non-smokers. But for example, if they start saying you can't smoke in your own home, I'm not gonna be happy about that."

— F, Twickenham

Other health behaviours were also mentioned:

"I know it's good to breastfeed, but it's a woman's choice to breastfeed. No one should feel pressure."

— M, Sheffield

However, in both cases, there were other participants who made counter-arguments supporting the state's role in these spheres of life. As mentioned earlier, sometimes this came down to saving public money – if you expect the state to provide healthcare, then you should accept that it imposes some rules restricting unhealthy behaviours.

There was some discussion about the state's role in shaping behaviours that impact the environment. Protecting the environment was also one of the top four obligations identified by participants. Whilst it was not clear whether the state was considered the counterpart in this obligation, references to recycling in particular seemed to reflect an internalisation of decades of government campaigns encouraging people to separate waste. Some participants also spoke positively in reference to taking up government incentives to install solar panels on homes or make other environmentally-friendly home improvements which reflects a recognition that the state can shape our energy-use behaviours (see Lesson 8). Whilst there was some resistance to this, there was less resistance to the government influencing environmentally-related behaviours than to the government influencing health-related behaviours. As noted above, the argument 'it's my health, so I can choose what I do' was used on at least one occasion. The same argument could not be used in relation to environmentally-related behaviours.

On the flipside, security was frequently mentioned as an expectation. Personal security was the second most commonly mentioned expectation, with frequent demands for more policing. There was also an awareness of a more nuanced role for the state in providing security, for example through schooling, providing youth clubs, and ensuring good wages – all of which were seen to keep people out of crime.

"If you had people that were happier because they were in better health, they had goals, they had purpose, they had ... good colleges, good schools, good jobs to go to, they'd be less angry, so there'd probably be less violence. ... If you have more equality, then you don't get separate groups that feel really discluded and disgruntled, so everyone feels that they have a part to play. So everyone's invested in society. It's not like one group feels like they're outcast and so why should they contribute?"

— F, Hendon

Whilst national defence was less commonly mentioned, this appeared to simply be because participants took it for granted. Social security, in terms of benefits and welfare and tackling poverty and homelessness were also high up on participants' expectations from the state.

Given the discussion on the state's role in shaping our health-related behaviour, it also seems reasonable to see the expectation of healthcare as part of the Security Pact, i.e. the state is seen to have a duty to protect us from health-related risks. This was most clearly observed in relation to the expectation that the government engage more in preventative care.

However, little was said about the state's role in terms of protecting us from risks in relation to the environment. The expectation of a clean environment or sustainability was only mentioned in a couple of focus groups, although there were calls for stricter enforcement of environmental rules, e.g.:

"If there's photographic or film evidence of you tipping... they should crush your car."

— M, Bridgend

4. The Democracy Pact is defined more by fairness and accountability, than actual voice

We defined the Democracy Pact as involving forfeiting direct political voice in exchange for the possibility to elect representatives and for a society based on common laws. Whilst themes of law, voting and democracy all emerged during the focus

groups, it is fair to say that participants did not see the Democracy Pact in the way that we have outlined it. Most importantly, participants did not consider the alternate scenario of having a direct political voice, and, consequently, did not see forfeiting

this direct voice as some form of obligation or cost. Instead they mostly saw voting itself as an obligation – something that good citizens should do. There was some discussion about voting also being a privilege, and there was a sense that citizens who chose not to take advantage of that privilege should not complain about the consequences.

“I’m a big believer that if you didn’t vote, don’t complain.”

— F, Twickenham

However, the right to vote only appeared in the lists of expectations on one occasion. What appeared more often were features of what can be seen as a well-functioning democracy, e.g. accountability, transparency and freedom of speech.

“I hate ... that they [politicians] can claim expenses ... That’s our money, innit?”

— M, Bridgend

“Government as a whole ... needs to be a lot more transparent.”

— F, Twickenham

“Having people that are in government that represent the people.”

— F, Twickenham

The idea of a society based on common laws also did not appear explicitly in conversations. Having said that, some of the discussions around fairness can be understood partly in terms of equal treatment under the law – for example, that politicians should not get away with claiming expenses that are not within the rules, and that benefits should only be given to those who deserve them.

Rather than a lawful society being seen as an expectation, law was more frequently mentioned in the discussion of obligations, with ‘obeying the law’ being amongst the top four obligations. In summary, participants’ first sketch of a Democracy Pact appeared to be along the following lines: “we expect a well-functioning democracy with accountable, transparent and honest politicians in exchange for voting and obeying the law”.

5. Respect as an alternative perspective on the Democracy Pact

As noted (Lesson 1), respect towards others was the most frequently cited obligation. Respect was not discussed in our original social contract, but can be seen as an element of the Democracy Pact. In the first instance, it is about inter-citizen relationships (and of course the obligation to respect other citizens implies an expectation of being respected by other citizens), but extends to an expectation that politicians respect citizens by being honest and transparent with them.

Some highlighted the fact that some obligations are hard to meet, but respect is something that everyone can do.

“There are a lot of things in the list that maybe some people would say can’t do or find it more difficult to do, whereas that one [respect] is something everyone can do.”

— F, Hendon

6. Consumption Pact: The government is primarily seen as responsible for protecting citizens from the cost of living crisis

Our original proposition for the Consumption Pact was that it was about accepting consumer pressure and inequality in exchange for the possibilities to enhance wellbeing through consumption. The expectation embedded in this Pact was expressed very strongly in terms of cost of living. Participants repeatedly brought up the cost of living crisis and their expectation that government should ensure that people are able to afford things like food, housing, energy, car insurance and travel. Although references to the

ability to fly abroad for holidays can be understood as concerning discretionary consumption, participants generally talked about these goods and services as if they were basic needs. In other words, they expect governments to ensure that citizens are able to afford a basic level of consumption to maintain their wellbeing in line with Western standards.

" I think with the energy prices, ... energy firms are making so much money anyway and our price bills are going up. So that's the bit I probably don't understand that they don't cap it. ... they allow ... these companies to make billions and billions really. "

— M, Hendon

" Things should be cheaper. "

— F, Sheffield

One group talked about the government's role in ensuring a stable economy.

On the other hand, the obligations we hypothesised as being part of this pact were not explicitly identified by participants, who presumably would refer to working and paying taxes as the counterparts for consumption..

7. Mixed opinions on inequality and poverty reduction

The cost of living was normally referred to in reference to the current crisis and there was an implication that participants were talking about the general population. Other discussions highlighted mixed opinions about tackling inequality and poverty reduction specifically. Inequality was clearly identified as a problem:

" That's the problem with most countries is that the money doesn't trickle down to the people. "

— F, Twickenham

Tackling poverty felt more important to participants than reducing inequalities, and there was much reference to the need for 'welfare', 'benefits' or 'social services'. These generally referred to targeted benefits for vulnerable groups such as the elderly or disabled people, or targeted interventions such as food banks.

However, other participants only mentioned benefits to complain about people receiving too many benefits. For example:

" I see some people getting £2000 In benefit. I mean, I don't know what their situations are, but I just think people can't just expect to keep having children. "

— M, Bridgend

The implication here is that people are having children so as to receive more benefits.

Meanwhile, there were others who complained that taxes were too high. For example, one participant in London felt that it was unfair that he was 'punished' for working hard (seven days a week) by

having to pay a higher rate of taxes. Linked to this was a perception that higher taxes were bad for the country, because it demotivates people to work hard.

" 100 most richest people are from USA, China and not from UK. So in UK, no matter how hard you work, you can't just go beyond certain point. "

— M, Twickenham

" They're [in the US] working hard, but at least they have something to show for it, whereas we're constantly just being bled dry in order for taxes and this and that. "

— F, Twickenham

" It's penalising those who are, you know, working hard or ... they've studied law, for example, so many years or become a doctor ...but they get penalised and get 50% taken away from them. So therefore that teaches a bad benefit culture in this country and people think why should I work so hard? ... So it doesn't push people... "

— F, Twickenham

Although one participant quickly responded that the USA pays the price with much higher levels of poverty, the opinion was not outright rejected by the group. In other words, lower taxes (and as such higher inequality) are believed by some to be required to ensure that people work hard (and therefore contribute to national prosperity).

8. Environmental issues considered more in terms of citizens' obligations than expectations from government

References to the environment were deliberately avoided in the introductions and descriptions of the tasks, as we wanted to test whether participants mentioned environmental issues spontaneously.

The environment did not feature very prominently in discussions of expectations, but it was discussed in three out of four focus groups. In North London, a clean environment was identified as a top five expectation in one focus group, though there was little discussion of what this meant beyond clean streets. In South London, one participant raised sustainability as an expectation from government, referring specifically to protection from climate change and reduction of air pollution and water pollution was mentioned. Meanwhile in Bridgend, one participant spoke strongly in reference to energy efficiency, and an expectation that government should improve energy efficiency and help citizens do the same. Participants agreed that this was to reduce CO₂ emissions, but also save money.

" There should be a national policy where the government says every new house has to have X amount of insulation and solar panels. "

— M, Bridgend

" Yes for the environment and for your own bills. "

— F, Bridgend

Richer conversations emerged when discussing citizen obligations, with protecting the environment or reducing resource use being amongst the top four obligations. Indeed, aside from respecting others, respecting the environment was the only obligation mentioned in all break-out groups. Whilst much of the conversation focussed on relatively commonplace pro-environmental behaviours such as recycling or reducing energy use, there were also conversations about buying second-hand, buying seasonal produce, buying local and investing in energy efficiency home improvements. To this extent, at least some focus groups acknowledged the need to change consumption patterns to meet environmental goals.

" We should try and eat seasonal. "

— M, Sheffield

" I've put using charities [secondhand shops] instead of buying from a shop ... So my local charity shop near me is for the children and the elderly, so they pump it back into the exercise classes and stuff. Whereas if I go to a designer shop that's going to somebody sat drinking champagne. "

— F, Sheffield

" Why are we trucking food from the UK overseas and from overseas to the UK? "

— M Sheffield

In Wales, there was an interesting discussion on who should shoulder responsibility for improving sustainability:

" if we all did lots of little things towards the environment or whatever, then I think it would have a bigger impact. "

— F, Bridgend

*" instead of saying, let's have a group and a couple of us could do this and that, the government and the world **should** say we are banning plastic bags. ... So why are governments right across the world not stopping these things? Because they could easily. "*

— F, Bridgend

Broadly though, the results show that participants placed the onus of action on citizens rather than government. But there was some discussion of governments' role in terms of providing the carrots and sticks to motivate pro-environmental behaviour.

9. Obligations frequently framed in terms of cost-savings

Several of the most commonly mentioned obligations were framed around the need to save public money (so that public services could be provided better). For example, self-care, or looking after one's own health (which was the sixth most important obligation), was typically framed around the need to save the National Health Service (NHS) money, for example:

" Look after your health, as in smoking and drinking, to reduce the impact on the NHS. "

— M, Bridgend

" If we looked after ourselves better, that would save on health and social services. "

— F, Bridgend

" Teaching our children to be healthy, good values, because that will affect the NHS in the long run if they're not obese, they're not smoking, they're looking after themselves. "

— F, Sheffield

In other words, participants believed that citizens have an obligation to look after their health to reduce the burden on the public health service. Similar points were made regarding the local environment (e.g. citizens should avoid littering to save the state the cost of cleaning up), crime and looking after young and old family members (to save the state the cost of looking after them). For example:

" So if everybody respects the laws, then it reduces the amount of time that police spend on like non-emergency crimes. "

— M, Hendon

This perception of citizens' obligations in terms of saving public resources was not expected and warrants further exploration. Is it specific to the UK context? Is it a response to ongoing debates around the state's ability to fund public services? Or was it simply an artefact of having the conversation on obligations shortly after a conversation on public services? After all, many of the 'obligations' mentioned (for example looking after one's own health and family members) are likely to also involve some intrinsic motivation. This reveals some limits to the social contract metaphor – not everything is a matter of give and take. In some cases there are mutual benefits for both state *and* citizen.

10. Public services central to both expectations and obligations

The top five expectations were all services that citizens expect from government (healthcare, security, education, housing and benefits), and indeed can all be linked to specific governmental departments. In that sense, participants almost saw expectations as synonymous with public services.

Sometimes this was seen as quite transactional – i.e. I expect good public services because I pay taxes. For example:

" But if they're gonna take the money in taxes, [they should] provide the service. I couldn't go into Sainsbury's (British supermarket chain) and give them £100 and them not give me any food. I expect that. So don't take the money without giving us the service. "

— M, Sheffield

Meanwhile, as noted in Lesson 9, public services also shaped the conversations around citizens' obligations. Aside from the perceived obligation to reduce the costs of public services, specific references were made to using and supporting public services, and refraining from abusing them. For example, one participant argued that it was a duty to use public libraries, so that they are not lost:

" I put it down as an obligation to use, because if it's not being used, we'll lose it. "

— M, Sheffield

This participant seemed to hold the position that, even if one personally does not need those public services, it is important that they are available for the wider community.

3. Key insights from the interviews in France

Methodology

The focus group approach enabled us to explore the collective dimension of the Pacts, and to bring out the capacity for compromise across the social, political and economic divides between individuals. However, it did not allow us to explore the lived experience of the participants and to understand the place that the four pacts and resulting promises have taken in their lives. The interview approach allows us to explore this dimension, as described in the following section.

The interview phase took place between February and March 2024: twenty qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted lasting an average of 1.5 hours. These interviews were conducted via video call in order to gain access to participants in a variety of areas (urban, suburban, rural, etc.). The sample, which was not intended to be exhaustive in terms of representativeness, was made up as follows: 50% men and 50% women, cultural diversity (some of our participants arrived in France at the age of 20, others are grandchildren or children of immigrants from Africa). We wanted a varied sample in terms of the division of labour, the degree of autonomy people enjoy in their jobs, and the types of professions (soldier, school teacher, civil servant, manager, executive secretary, farm worker, logistics employee, town hall employee, bank employee, etc.), with a deliberate over-representation of the middle classes. Our sample also included a few retired people, as well as people looking for work.

As far as the conduct of our interview was concerned, it was important that the concepts of pact, contract, *quid pro quo*, etc. were avoided, so that the interview would reveal whether the interviewees would spontaneously use this contractual vocabulary to describe social life (and in which areas in

particular they use it). It was also important not to mention some of our pacts explicitly so as not to bias the discussion, and instead to analyse how/if these themes appear naturally in the course of the exchange: this was the case for two of them, Security and Consumption. Explicitly mentioning consumption ('do you consume a lot?'; 'what do you prefer to consume?') would have had the disadvantage of immediately triggering an ecological angle to the interview, or even arousing guilt and self-censorship in the person concerned, which we wanted to avoid. We preferred to have the participant talk about their consumption indirectly, by asking them what they had done the previous Sunday, for example. As for insecurity, it was important for us to determine whether this feeling was a prevalent subjective (and objective) factor among our interviewees, without artificially provoking this theme.

We started with a life story ('where did you grow up?') and gradually moved on to a looser questionnaire on everyday practices, asking for anecdotes, accounts of specific experiences, concrete examples ("can you tell me about your weekend?"; "tell me about your day at work"; "could you give me an example of the conflicts you mention in your job"), and avoiding opinion questions (such as: "what would a good democracy be for you?"; "do you think consumerism is a good thing?"). The idea was to anchor the questionnaire in lived experience (knowing that this experience is embedded in a wide range of social and collective mechanisms), in order to identify the major narratives, the major promises and any disappointments or expectations that structure the interviewee's daily life. Finally, it should be pointed out that our questionnaire acted more as an occasional support than as a guide: it was important for us to follow the thread adopted by our interviewee, rather than imposing themes.

1. There is a contractual vision of our social, political and economic life

A number of respondents saw social and collective life in the form of a contract, even though we avoided using the term in our discussions: during the interviews, the logics of reciprocal commitment, exchange and transaction were expressed in terms of the four pacts. This contractual vision applies not only to areas where there is an objective act of contractualisation (such as employment contracts), but more broadly in the spheres of democracy and solidarity.

"I'm not a fan of demonstrations. [...] I'm of the opinion that we've signed a contract, I've signed a contract, there's my hourly rate, there's my progression in relation to my grades, that's how it goes, I'm not going to start signing a contract and then after 6 months come crying."

— Yanis, 36, special needs educator

"For the State to be respected, it has to be respectable."

— François, 55, deputy head of department

Beginning the interviews by looking back over their life course" is a particularly good way of gaining access to these pact logics: the interviewees are led to formulate for themselves any breaking points, or moments in their lives during which a discrepancy was revealed between the collective promise and their individual experience. The interviewees also report unfulfilled promises, or social pacts that have not "trickled down" to them – a disappointment or feeling of injustice that can be experienced as a form of personal crisis:

"I've always put in more effort than I've had in return, but it's been that way."

— Fred, 47, paramedic

Thus, this contractual formalisation seems to have both a pedagogical function (making social existence, structured by various transactions, comprehensible) and a politicising function (distinguishing satisfactory compromises from unfair ones). Finally, in a way that our theoretical framework did not anticipate, some of the interviewees were even able to express their distrust of social benefits and the logic of assistance on the pretext that they were contractual in nature: such assistance always requires compensation in exchange on the part of those assisted, an obligation of retribution that it is best to be aware of before accepting any kind of state assistance.

"I know a bit about the politics of that world, which is that they can't give you anything without something in return."

— Stan, 44, logistics manager

"Yes, they [the politicians] are going to do something, they're going to do something, but then they go back to something else, so automatically it's not going to work. But yes, they do it by taking the other side."

— Étienne, 51, military

2. The widespread feeling that the contract is not being respected or is even being breached

The interviews reveal a shared feeling of general deterioration, or sometimes even a feeling of downward intergenerational mobility in comparison with a previous generation (the opportunities for home ownership or upward social mobility are no longer the same as they were for their parents, for example). Almost all the people interviewed describe a recent deterioration in what we might call "our social contract" and the elements that comprise it, in particular those mentioned by the interviewees below. This feeling of deterioration is all the more interesting in that it often takes the form of disappointment with a desired reality that people perceive as a guarantee from the State or our society: ensuring work and housing for all, for example. This feeling of disintegration is not expressed by a particular age group or professional category in

our sample: it emerges almost systematically and spontaneously in the course of the various interviews, without us needing to ask about particular elements of dissatisfaction. The frame of reference for comparison varies quite logically according to age: the under-40s refer to their parents' era, perceived as 'easier', and the older people compare their present with their life as a young adult, judged to be more serene and less hampered by the dysfunctions that are now characteristic of society as a whole.

" Our parents, they had this ease of buying houses easily, we also want to buy houses easily. "

— Stan, 44, logistics manager

The feeling of being downgraded, of "broken promises" or of being misled is widespread among the respondents:

" In fact, I have the impression that people have been downgraded since... I remember my parents at the time. Sometimes in a couple there was only one who worked, he built a house and lived properly in a home. And now I sometimes think there's 2...the 2 are working, the 2 are on minimum wage and they can't... they can't buy any more. "

— Florian, 40, police officer/head brigadier

" I think that [...] the teenager I was at the time was lucky compared to today. [...] Today I wouldn't have the same access to higher education, after all, there are more things that were free at that time [...]. "

— Sarah, 35, school teacher

" In fact, clearly there's no magic social lift that... That will allow people to have the same opportunities. It's all full of representations that we have around us, [and] we don't even give it a chance. "

— Thomas, 29, farm worker, looking for a job

The disappointment felt or the deterioration observed by the people interviewed is also described and explained differently depending on their political persuasion. It would seem that conservative-minded people⁵ are particularly concerned about the decline in values such as respect (understood as recognition of an individual's dignity, but also as non-contestant recognition of the structuring authorities of our society – starting with school) or physical safety (fear of being attacked in the city centre or in the underground). Meanwhile socialist-minded people see an erosion of tolerance, solidarity, demands for social justice and a halt to the upward social mobility dynamic. Some people (mainly socialists, but not exclusively) also mention the difficulty of having to deal with new uncertainties, such as climate change. Other themes emerge in a more non-partisan way: the loss of social ties is a widely shared observation, and is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of deterioration in certain public services (teaching

conditions⁶ and hospitals, in particular), purchasing power, access to consumer goods and anxiety about the downgrading of certain sections of the population:

" Today, anonymity is much more developed. People are a bit, I would say... There's less solidarity [...]. It's a bit every man for himself these days. "

— Virginie, 59, executive assistant

" So I think there's [...] even a sense of belonging that's being lost. "

— Stéphanie, 31, consultant-trainer, looking for a job

" And people don't know how to respect. I mean, there's no more, there's no more education. [...] there are no values, there's nothing, it's all in tatters. "

— Fred, 47, paramedic

" I miss respect [...] a lot in society now. Respect for oneself and respect for others. "

— Étienne, 51, military

" it's become a bit individualistic. Now people [...] actually care about themselves, and they don't necessarily care about other people. "

— Rayane, 37, driver

In any case, the range of types of disappointment with the social contract is varied: the logic of disappointed promises (gains hoped for but not achieved), unfair compromises (dissatisfaction with standards of justice; competition between groups to obtain advantages or benefits), the obsolescence of social compromises (certain promises or 'balances' need to be updated), the expectation of a pact (a compromise is expected but does not yet exist).

These elements are also indications that the individualism of our modern societies can go hand in hand with a concern for the rights and dignity of others, and that it does not equate to egoism: many of the people interviewed were alarmed by the downgrading of other social groups, of professions considered to be socially

5 We use here Cyril Lemieux's ideological tripartition (socialism - liberalism - conservatism). See, among others: "Entretien avec Bruno Karsenti et Cyril Lemieux à propos de leur essai, *Socialisme et sociologie*", *Raisons politiques*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2019, pp. 133-161.

6 Our sample included a school teacher and a primary school headteacher, which also explains why this concern was so prevalent – but it was not only expressed by these two people.

important, by the difficulty of the latter to access certain goods, services or quite simply to be recognised. So the individualisation of practices and values is real in our societies, and is explicitly reflected in certain expectations, but it is accompanied by a

valorisation of the individual and his or her dignity that leads us to hope for mechanisms of solidarity and protection for everyone, as well as an absolute guarantee of individual integrity.

3. Work – the key to social life, but undermined by employment conditions

The interviews reveal high expectations in terms of working conditions and the balance between effort and reward. The people interviewed expressed a strong attachment to the Work Pact, and to work in general. Contributing to productive effort is seen as a means of accessing financial security and autonomy, and consumption, but it is also seen as a vehicle for socialisation, identity, status, stimulation (for the better-off in the sample) and self-esteem.

“ You’ve got no job, you’ve got no social life: that pretty much sums it up. ”

— Fred, 47, paramedic

“ It doesn’t matter where you are, as long as you do your studies, as long as you work normally, there’s no reason why things shouldn’t go well. [...] ”

— Stan, 44, logistics manager

“ Work gives you a sense of pride. [...] What does work give you? Well, that feeling: ‘I deserve it.’ ”

— Catherine, 54, management IT specialist, looking for work

Conversely, the fact that a job is difficult to obtain, that it does not provide all the earnings hoped for, or that it is less remunerative to work than to receive unemployment benefit (a dysfunction regularly pointed out by the respondents), is described as an injustice, or as a failure by the State to fulfil its contract:

“ It’s things that are beyond me [...] that people can’t actually live properly, despite the fact that they work and get up early and actually struggle. ”

— Florian, 40, police officer/head brigadier

“ In the articles of the French Constitution, it is clearly stated that the Republic must provide work for all [...] its citizens. This is far from being the case today. ”

— Jean-Baptiste, 69, retired bank branch manager

“ I’ve got my best friend who’s a teacher [...] and she doesn’t get paid astronomical sums and I think to myself, she paid that price, to work [...] to be in danger every day, not knowing what to expect, [...] it’s not fair. ”

— Louisa, 27, town hall project manager

Respondents have high expectations of working conditions, particularly in terms of salary adjustment: remuneration should be commensurate with effort, ‘merit’ and investment. If it is not, another form of compensation must be guaranteed: free time, strict separation of work and personal life, autonomy, or flexible working hours.

“ Inevitably, the heavier the workload, the more I hope to be well paid. Which, well, I think is normal. ”

— Louisa, 27, project manager in a town hall

“ When you’re a teacher, you have a lot of freedom. It’s true, this freedom to create, [...] to be able to manage yourself [...] I don’t think I could go back on that any more ”

— Sarah, 35, school teacher

This appreciation of work is quite logically accompanied by criticism of the logic of government assistance, which is considered unsatisfactory in relation to the benefits of work, and is sometimes perceived as too lax by the most conservative respondents in the sample, and as a breach of the Work-Security Pact (working to be helped).

“Aid [...] is a vicious circle. We want to see the value of our work enhanced.”

— Stan, 44, logistics manager

“Some people are lulled to sleep by welfare benefits, they say to themselves: they give me this, well I'll take that, and then that's it, basically I'll let myself live.”

— Rayane, 37, driver

Finally, there is a strong sense of dissatisfaction with ongoing competitiveness and the omnipresent logic of productivity, perceived as a demand that is detrimental to the development of social ties at work, to the meaning of work, to its effectiveness, and to wellbeing at work – especially when it also translates into the anonymisation of workers and excessive managerial surveillance. These systems are seen as contrary to the principles of the Work Pact, which consists of investing oneself in order to obtain a form of recognition, trust from one's peers and self-fulfilment. Conversely, a job where “the demand for figures” is not a structuring factor is considered desirable:

“If we always put profitability first, it's not possible, [...] you can't have profitability and wellbeing, it's not true.”

— Jean-Baptiste, 69, retired bank branch manager

“[At the Post Office] we put pressure on them to go faster and faster. They've been cut off [...] from the public.”

— François, 55, deputy head of department

This logic of profitability, including in the public services, is encouraged by organisational changes and new work technologies which, according to the people interviewed, are breaking down social links and hampering workers' efficiency, to the benefit of 'surveillance':

“We no longer have direct access, even to our colleagues at the CAF and the Sécu [French national health service], we call them like any other person, there is no continuity of care, we're pretty helpless.”

— Gabrielle, 48, social worker

“IT has taken on a predominant role, and I'm going to use the word, but with constant surveillance.”

— Jean-Baptiste, 69, bank branch manager, retired

4. Work as a place of recognition and humanisation

The people interviewed expressed strong expectations in terms of recognition at work. This recognition can take the form of material or symbolic rewards: a salary commensurate with the effort put in, or the expression of gratitude, from the hierarchical superior or, in the service sector, from users or customers.

This recognition goes far beyond the simple matter of a one-off thank-you for harmonious and healthy relations at work. The gain in recognition is perceived as the tangible translation of equality between peers, of a place, of belonging to society, of individual value within the collective, as recognition of one's position in the division of labour – and sometimes, by extension, as recognition of the value and usefulness of certain professional positions in general (class consciousness).

“I can't, I won't work again the way I did, with this ball in my stomach and people looking down on you.”

— Catherine, 54, management IT specialist, jobseeker

What the respondents had to say largely confirms that recognition is now a “total social fact”⁷ – i.e. it constitutes an expectation and structures relations in all areas of social existence – and a particularly high professional expectation.

“It's the recognition that makes you feel good. When you do your job and someone tells you it's well done, you're really happy. [...] That's where it ends for me, I think it's great.”

— Virginie, 59, executive assistant

7 Alain Caillé, *La quête de reconnaissance. Nouveau phénomène social total*, Paris, La Découverte, 2007.

“ For me [what keeps me going] is the patients’ thanks or recognition. When they come back, they say to you: Ah but it was you who brought me to the operating theatre. ”

— Fred, 47, paramedic

For many, this expectation is not being met, as evidenced by their impression of anonymity at work, another effect of the logic of competitiveness (see Lesson 3):

“ Where I work, it’s very complicated because there’s a hellish atmosphere. I’m just a number to my superiors. ”

— Virginie, 59, executive assistant

“ There’s nothing personal about it, we’re just numbers to them. ”

— Sarah, 35, school teacher

This perceived interchangeability, this feeling of being anonymous and of not bringing any specific added value to the collective, is all the more resented in our modern societies because it clashes with the opposite injunction: that of developing as an individual. Some people feel that they do not have the working environment they need to fulfil this injunction, which feeds the feeling of being on the fringes of a professional ideal.

5. The Democracy Pact goes far beyond institutions and constructs expectations in many spheres of social life

The people interviewed perceive the Democracy Pact as a pact that is not strictly institutional, and that does not boil down to our electoral and governmental system. Among the democratic themes that we had previously identified in our preparatory script, and which in our opinion refer to arrangements linked to democracy, it was those relating to democratic *values* that spontaneously appeared in the words of our interviewees, rather than issues relating to institutional procedures (which only appeared when we asked specific questions about them). These values, mentioned incidentally when the interviewees recount their working day, a friendly experience or other, refer to a desired collective way of life, articulated around certain ideals of living together: the fight against racism, the attachment to respect, the desire for autonomy at work, equal conditions, the fight against sexism, recognition of difference, living together, etc.: these are the values that the interviewees expressed in their interviews:⁸

“ I think that living together is important and that we all bring something to each other, whoever we are, whatever our sexual orientation, wherever we come from. ”

— Rébecca, 44, administrative manager

“ I hope [...] that inequalities stop growing because that’s what leads to political crises. ”

— Sarah, 35, school teacher

“ It’s people who don’t accept difference. [...] It’s society that’s like that in fact, we don’t accept difference. ”

— Fred, 47, paramedic

“ I realised that even on this scale of a small branch [Jeunesses Socialistes]... At meetings, well, it’s the men who do the talking and it’s the women who put the stuff in the letterboxes, you know? ”

— Gabrielle, 48, social worker

This democratic attachment also manifests itself in the demand for a form of freedom and autonomy in the way we live our lives, an assertion that is sometimes vivid in the field of consumerism, where the act of buying is defined as a fundamental right:

“ What I don’t like is being told what to do; if I want to buy something for myself, I’ll buy something, if I want to please my parents and buy them something, I’ll buy it. ”

— Fred, 47, paramedic

These democratic expectations do not seem to be fully met. The racialised people in our sample express the feeling that they do not have access to fully equal citizenship with French people whose

⁸ Even among respondents who (sometimes) make xenophobic comments, the value of tolerance and an interest in difference are paradoxically affirmed.

grandparents or parents are not immigrants.. This supports a Democracy Pact that is betraying its promises of integration and of de-coupling French citizenship from cultural or ethnic origin.

*[on the proposed loss of nationality]:
“ We’re going to take away the nationality of someone who has origins, and someone who doesn’t have origins, i.e. who’s French by birth, what do we do if they do something stupid? We keep the Frenchman! [...] ”*

— Stan, 44, logistics manager

This is seen as all the more unfair because these people have contributed and fulfilled their obligations in France (the logic of the Pact).

6. Voting is seen as a duty, and expectations of democratic representation are high

There was no widespread criticism of the logic of electoral representation. On the contrary, there is a fairly widespread recognition of the vote as an obligation and an emblem of democracy:

“ [Voting] is a duty, as a patriot. ”

— Stan, 44, logistics manager

“ I vote in every election. I think it’s important. I tell myself that afterwards there are people who don’t agree with me. But I feel that our elders fought hard. ”

— Rébecca, 44, administrative manager

“ In voting, we’re all on an equal footing to express our choice, whatever our social or cultural level or whatever. And every vote has the same value in fact, whether you’re rich or poor, it’s all the same. ”

— Florian, 40, police officer/head brigadier

Voting also offers a quid pro quo: you have to vote to be able to complain, and you have to vote to obtain rights:

“ I’d find it stupid not to go and vote when we’re in a democracy. I mean, if we don’t go and vote, we don’t have the right to complain. ”

— Thomas, 29, farm worker, looking for work

“ Because I also hear a lot of people complaining. The powers that be aren’t working, the political powers and all that. [...] At least when there are elections, well yes, we go and vote [...] ”

— Stéphanie, 31, consultant-trainer, looking for work

This does not prevent a number of respondents from relativising the effect of the vote, as elected politicians are under no obligation to keep their promises and be accountable to their electors, or to include them in the decision-making process – which may indicate a desire for greater participation, but this is very rarely explicitly stated:

“ Once the votes have been cast, well, that’s that... we’re pretty passive. There’s not much we can do about it. ”

— Thomas, 29, farm worker, looking for work

“ I find that once it’s voted, that’s it, it’s gone for 5 years and they don’t ask us anything more. ”

— Jean-Baptiste, 69, bank branch manager, retired

On the other hand, and irrespective of their ideological background, the respondents explicitly expect voters to be more fairly represented and representative – which implies a sociological resemblance between those who govern and those who are governed, taking into account the diversity of expectations and lifestyles from one social group to another, actually fulfilling the promises made during the campaign and a relative convergence of interests between representatives and those represented (4 key principles of representation, according to the respondents). Many people are disappointed by the sociological disconnection

between the elites and the difference in interests between those who govern and those who are governed, which they see as contrary to the Democracy Pact:

“He wants to make decisions but he’s not in my place.”

— Louisa, 27, town hall project manager

“It really lacks, so it’s exactly like school and work, it lacks the link between people at all levels who make decisions for us and the people finally, or the connection what.”

— Aurélie, 36, product manager

“And then we realise that the people who govern us are not close to the people.”

— Virginie, 59, executive assistant

“When I hear politicians telling us ‘we need to create a link with the population’: but you’re the ones who cut it off.”

— François, 55, deputy head of department

7. The Consumption Pact: a source of individual wellbeing and collective prosperity and a means of “living well”

For most respondents, consumption is seen as the key to prosperity, whether individual (wellbeing) or collective (economic benefits). Consumption is seen as a means of pleasure (“indulging oneself”), of a “decent life” (the inability to consume leisure activities being equated with a poor life) and of growth. Consumption can certainly give rise to a form of guilt, particularly among the respondents most sensitive to the ecological cause, but this is offset by the certainty of contributing to national wealth. In this case, the Consumption Pact is clearly identified by the respondent:

“Aside from that, we go to more restaurants, cinemas and theatres. We feel guilty when we say to ourselves ‘yes, but we’re helping the business.’”

— Gabrielle, 48, social worker

Consumption is also a means of acquiring social status, when work does not provide the hoped-for recognition,⁹ and above all it compensates for life’s uncertainties, anxiety or productive effort – in a relatively transideological way, in the case of our respondents:

“They say we should stop buying clothes [...]. They don’t realise that if the shops close, there will be more unemployed people, if we don’t build any more cars [...] there won’t be any more workers, there won’t be any more factories.”

— Fred, 47, paramedic

“And then these prices and the cost of living, consumerism is crazy, but how much do you have to earn to have a decent life?”

— Lydia, 61, school principal

“[I buy] records or books. It’s important to please myself. Of course, it’s important. It’s not essential, but it’s important to please yourself. [...] It’s complicated, so we need to take our minds off the activities we were talking about earlier.”

— Jean-Baptiste, 69, bank branch manager, retired

“When I’m feeling a bit down, [...] I go for a walk in the shops, as I think all women do.”

— Rébecca, 44, administrative manager

Another noteworthy fact is that the desired level of consumption is broadly in line with that of the upper middle classes, or even the upper classes, whose lifestyles are now better known:¹⁰ lots of leisure (sometimes considered as essential as eating), luxury brands, long-distance travel, reputed to open the mind, the possibility of consuming without anticipating, without any logic of ‘saving’ or forecasting, far from the observable reality where constrained spending plays a major role.

9 This is the case for our interviewees who suffer from a lack of recognition, malaise or low self-esteem at work, but adopt distinctive practices in their consumption (a collection of limited edition trainers, or a collection of vinyl records, to cite examples from our interviews). These seem to function as compensation.

10 As Nicolas Duvoux writes, the fact that we live in a service society means that social classes that used to be separated are now coming together. See Nicolas Duvoux, “Comment l’assistance chasse l’État social”, *Idées économiques et sociales*, vol. 171, no. 1, 2013, pp. 10-17.

" I see my son, there's a passport that's better than mine, isn't it? [...] I would have liked to have as many stamps on my passport as his. "

— Virginie, 59, executive assistant

" [The unemployed person] is going to plan to be able to do this, to be able to have this pleasure, he's not going to say to himself: "yeah well I'm going to enjoy myself". [...] They have to calculate, they're always calculating. "

— Rayane, 37, bus driver

" [My mother] really doesn't have any hobbies. She rarely goes to the cinema. She only goes to the restaurant when someone invites her. She always has to count everything when she does the shopping and everything, well almost to the nearest euro, and well it's exhausting really. "

— Thomas, 29, farm worker, looking for work

" With two children, you can't go to restaurants as you like. [...] You forget the restaurant, you forget the cinema, your holidays are only once in the summer, you forget skiing, you forget all that. "

— Lydia, 61, school principal

8. A Consumption Pact where many feel they lack true autonomy

However much it is valued, the Consumption Pact appears to be the most uncontrolled and implicit of all the pacts. Consumption seems to have become so "naturalised" or integrated by the people interviewed that they recognise it. The respondents perceive and value what they obtain through consumption (leisure, services, material goods, renovation, etc.) but not the practice of consumption as such, proof that consumption remains primarily a mediation towards activities, routines and possessions associated with ordinary life, which are unlikely to be renegotiated.

This Pact is also hard to control insofar as, for many of the respondents – and this is where the ambivalence of perceptions around consumption comes in – consumption can be identified as a pressure, or an obligation in a society where everything is bought and monetised, even social relationships and leisure:

" The world works the way it is today and there are a lot of constraints and you have to pay... You have to pay rent and there are expenses... If you have a car, all that... and then there are all the leisure activities, friends, the social side... "

— Thomas, 29, farm worker, looking for a job

Consumption is also perceived as a collective practice permanently encouraged and organised by the economy. The methodology of the interview, through an individualised and sometimes intimate exchange, proved particularly capable of probing these pressures experienced in ordinary everyday life, and capturing apparently contradictory perceptions or tensions around the same social phenomenon (see part 4 for a proposal for a methodological reappropriation of these tensions). For example, consumerism sometimes gives rise to a certain unease – both as a consumer

and as a 'salesman', who has to respond to the imperative of profitability and encourage permanent purchases. The people interviewed seem to be bothered by the fact that they have no control over the frequency of their consumption (due to incessant advertising, targeting, incentives to buy, etc.) and that they cannot be sure that the conditions of production are ethically compliant:

" [People] are attracted, some buy, buy, buy. And then, in fact, it's an endless chain. Some people just don't make it. "

— Rayane, 37, bus driver

" But what worries us most is how these cars are made: how are they made? How are people used to make them? That's it, we're still in the same dynamic. "

— Jean-Baptiste, 69, retired bank branch manager

" Even if I rebounded tomorrow I don't think I'd fall back into this consumerism, [...] we think money will solve all our problems, we buy lots of stuff [...] and so I don't want that any more. "

— Catherine, 54, management IT specialist, looking for work

" And what bothers me is not that we consume too much, it's that we want to consume too much. "

— Sylvie, 64, social housing officer, retired

"I'm a consumer [...]. It's something I didn't really want. After a year in a Van where I had 3 pairs of socks and a bottle of water, I didn't want to go back to all that stuff. But yeah, of course you get carried away by it all. [...] You oversell things that you need but don't need. In fact, seeing ads makes us want things that we wouldn't have wanted if we hadn't seen the ad."

— Jean, 31, industrialisation technician

"With my customers, I tried to sell them what suited them, but sometimes it doesn't work because people don't want it, so if they don't want it, [...] I'm not going to insist [...] and we were criticised for that. That 'no, you have to do it anyway, and you sell it to them and then they'll see', but there you go, but you just have to do it."

— Jean-Baptiste, 69, bank branch manager, retired

This feeling of loss of control is also identified with the fact that the people interviewed experience the world of consumerism as a place of "traps"; profits or prohibitive costs, and that they have to be cunning to find "good deals", in particular by playing around with the merchandising techniques and commercial innovations available (mobile applications for spotting bargains, sales, loyalty cards, subscriptions, etc.), which, according to the respondents, make it possible to regain some control over the market. Without them, the feeling of constant frustration is unbearable:

(talking about a subscription where you receive monthly parcels of clothes):

"So I've taken away the frustration because when you go to a huge shopping centre and there are lots of things you like but you can't buy them, that frustrates me. [...] So now, every two months I get a little box that's kind of my little thing. [...] So I'm not frustrated."

— Aurélie, 36, product manager

"I go to Asos and fill baskets that I don't purchase. I'm not going to buy it, but I fill it..."

— Sarah, 36, school teacher

Some of the people we spoke to affirmed the idea that consumption is contrary to the spirit of solidarity, and that it deactivates our political faculties – also because it takes the form of credit. In this sense, consumption is a gain that comes with certain civic sacrifices:

"And then, in fact, we're more in a consumer mode than an actor mode. And when you're a consumer, you're not in solidarity, whereas when you're in action, [...] you're in touch with others in any case."

— Gabrielle, 48, social worker

It would therefore seem that there is no unilateral adherence to the consumerist injunction, even if there is a discrepancy between perceptions and practices (consumerists).

9. Security Pact: a feeling of physical and social insecurity

The feeling of physical insecurity is fairly widespread among the people interviewed, and seems to be, if not created, at least reinforced by a feeling of social insecurity linked in particular to the deterioration of public services. These two themes are often mentioned in succession by the same interviewee (physical insecurity and social insecurity), and it seems to us that they may be linked.

Many of the respondents expressed a strong sense of physical insecurity, either because they fear direct exposure to crime (someone close to them has been a victim, or their job brings them into contact with insecurity), or because they feel insecurity has increased through the media and the stories they hear:

"I [...] want to get out, I want to go for a walk without being attacked. [...] [Bayonne] has changed a lot in 12 years now, it's changed a lot and not in a good way."

— Fred, 47, paramedic

"Insecurity in... in France has increased tenfold."

— Lydia, 61, school principal

“ In the street, everywhere, insecurity, no, but security, I think that [...] apart from pay, it's the number one problem, I mean [...] people don't want to go out at night, there are robberies everywhere, there are muggings everywhere, there are...everywhere. ”

— Virginie, 59, executive assistant

This anxiety is sometimes accompanied by a form of social insecurity: the realisation that schools are in crisis, that social ties are weakening, that professional recognition is lacking, that the Pôle emploi (public organisation providing assistance to the unemployed in France) does not provide required assistance, that teachers can no longer work in good conditions, that we will have to ‘pay’ for social benefits, etc. In other words, that most of our social achievements may be on the verge of disappearing, and that our social contract is putting off its promises.¹¹ In other words, most of our social achievements may be on the verge of disappearing, and our social contract may be postponing its promises:

“ Like the destruction of the public hospital... which means that well people are going to have less and less access to care. ”

— Sarah, 35, school teacher

“ I had dreams, a little more social justice perhaps, access at least to a roof over our heads, protection through housing for the most disadvantaged people, things like that, and then I realise that at last... [...] there are even more people sleeping outside, there are even more children [...] sleeping in squats. ”

— Gabrielle, 48, social worker

“ Social protection, we can see that, in terms of social security, there are fewer and fewer reimbursements, we can see that, in hospitals we can see what it's like, what's going on. People are complaining more and more. ”

— Jean-Baptiste, 69, bank branch manager, retired

A small number of respondents, particularly those who seem to suffer from a lack of social and/or professional recognition, even feel that solidarity now comes essentially from private, family

and friendship circles, a reality experienced as a disappointment in relation to the narrative of state and national solidarity, and in relation to the promise of “unlimited” public services, irreducible to accounting resources, and whose function was originally to remedy inequalities in endowment.

“ The only hands I've had outstretched are my parents, who were there when I was going through a hard time, when I lost my job. ”

— Fred, 47, paramedic

This disillusionment goes hand in hand with the anxious feeling that social ties are disintegrating, that our collective is unravelling, and that the future is less clear for those who are always at risk of downward social mobility. In this sense, for these interviewees, these insecurities are mutually reinforcing in terms of their experiences.

“ I'm very worried. [...] When I have my little daughter in front of me, I can't put the future sign above her head. ”

— Sylvie, 64, social housing officer, retired

This combination is not without repercussions: it can reinforce the spirit of competition and the feeling of injustice in access to rights, as well as the temptation of authoritarianism, confirming the significant effects of a deterioration in public services and social assistance in the politicisation of different social groups. Some people feel that they are not entitled to the benefits that others receive: this is the notorious criticism of “welfare recipients”, which is also potentially fuelled by the alarmist rhetoric of politicians about our public spending,¹² according to which our social benefits are not sustainable – a predicted shortage that reinforces competition between the social groups closest to them.

“ We don't get the fuel allowance, we don't get the allowance for [...] renovating windows and all that. ”

— Étienne, 51, military

In other words, the threat to social systems and solidarity generates disappointment, tension and anxiety, but once this threat has been recognised and assimilated, people have to protect their place and their group in order to survive – a mechanism summed up by one of our interviewees:

11 This feeling of social insecurity is notable in 4 of the 5 people cited here (above) with regard to physical insecurity.

12 See Bruno Le Maire's statement on this subject: “État-Providence : il est temps de sortir du “ mirage de la gratuité universelle ”, défend Bruno Le Maire” La Tribune, 17 March 2024, <https://www.latribune.fr/economie/france/etat-providence-il-est-temps-de-sortir-du-mirage-de-la-gratuite-universelle-defend-bruno-le-maire-993174.html>

“ It doesn't help society to have more and more disparities like this. Clearly, people are increasingly pitted against each other. ”

— Thomas, 29, farm worker, looking for work

Very attached to work, the middle classes ultimately feel that they contribute a lot and receive little protection in return, that they suffer a situation of uncertainty and permanent deferment that they have not earned, while others, less hard-working, 'profit':

“ It needs to be rectified because I think there are some who are abusing all this stuff, quite clearly. [...] I'd be more in favour of tightening things up [...] because I think there are too many who have taken advantage. ”

— Stéphanie, 31, consultant-trainer, looking for a job

“ After a while [...] you have to look after yourself. I have the impression that sometimes we ask a lot to be assisted, we ask a lot to be helped, and so on. ”

— Yanis, 36, special needs educator

Here we find the classic expression of a triangular social consciousness: the middle classes feel doubly squeezed and suffer a double mechanism of inequality. They feel squeezed at the top, because of the privileges and unattainable wealth of the wealthy classes, and at the bottom, compared to the very modest social classes, which they are afraid to resemble (which would make them socially modest, or even downgraded). Having developed a form of fatalism with regard to the endowments of the upper classes, they harbour more resentment towards the lower classes (the unemployed, RSA recipients, etc.), in whom they see the reason for their impoverishment.¹³

10. Security Pact: Faced with uncertainty, a strong attachment to the collective and a demand for individualised support and assistance

The people interviewed were fairly unanimous in expressing a tension between a desire for individualisation and an attachment to the collective, without one seeming to outweigh the other.

Very often, these two wishes are intertwined, particularly around the subject of social assistance. A number of respondents felt that, for the time being, the French can consider themselves lucky to benefit from such a system, which is a specific feature of their country – proof of a still strong attachment to the welfare state¹⁴. In this sense, the idea of collective solidarity enjoys broad support, a plebiscite also attested to, albeit in a different way, by the interest of a good number of respondents in the charitable and mutual aid sector:

“ I think we're extremely lucky in France to have this healthcare system. [...] it's quite exceptional to be able to get by like that. ”

— Thomas, 29, farm worker, looking for work

“ But I think we still have good systems. I'm thinking of... social security. ”

— Stéphanie, 31, consultant-trainer, looking for a job

“ I do [...] lots of things, I'd like to [...] help people. Well, I worked for Samu Social for years. [...] I also think that people now [...] give less time to charities, less money too [...]. there are so many people who need help. ”

— Virginie, 59, executive assistant

“ If I had an income that would be enough for me, [...] maybe do some voluntary work [...], I think that would be giving back a little of what we are given. ”

— Stéphanie, 31, consultant-trainer, looking for work

In the climate of insecurity we mentioned (lesson 9) and social competition for access to public services – which are deemed to be increasingly rare and costly¹⁵ – the respondents seem to aspire

13 See “Haut, bas, fragile: sociologies du populaire. Interview with Annie Collovald & Olivier Schwartz”, *Vacarme*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2006, pp. 50-55; Félicien Faury, *Des électeurs ordinaires. Enquête sur la normalisation de l'extrême droite*, Paris, Seuil, 2024.

14 This confirms the view of some studies that European citizens' expectations of the welfare state are still very high, and do not, as such, reflect a strong commitment to liberalism. See Lise Bernard and Tom Chevalier, “Vers une 'droitisation' de la société française? Introduction”, *Sociologie*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2023, pp. 89-93).

15 “(excerpt from Louis Chauvel, *Les classes moyennes à la dérive*, chap. II, Paris, Seuil, coll. “La république des idées”, 2006, pp. 45-58, p. 53).

to a strong individualisation of social benefits, so as to be better prepared for the risks, which are deemed to be more numerous than in the past (conception of “tailor-made” social assistance¹⁶). This expectation is particularly strong when respondents talk about Pôle emploi, whose support is considered to be too minimal, lax and generic, and does not really enable people to reintegrate into the labour market: they have to “manage” on their own. The people interviewed were not so much questioning the amount or duration of unemployment benefit (which some of the sample had experienced) as the way in which Pôle emploi protects and reintegrates the unemployed, according to the specific characteristics and problems of each individual:

“It’s not so much a question of quantity, but more a question of quality, i.e. more help in terms of quality; not more money, but more support.”

— Sarah, 35, school teacher

“I have the impression that Pôle emploi is in the main. [...] I think that the State, the few measures they’ve put in place haven’t been enough to make Pôle emploi really take an interest in those who are unemployed, i.e. the tricks and things.”

— Stéphanie, 31, consultant-trainer, looking for work

“I’m being monitored today by Pôle emploi. Yes, and I come across people who don’t give a shit.”

— Catherine, 54, management IT specialist, looking for work

“Pôle emploi, they don’t support you all the way, even though it could lead to a job. [...] You had to fight on your own, you had to manage, you had to go door to door, you had to apply on the Internet.”

— Stan, 44, logistics manager

In other words, nothing less than highly individualised support is needed to ward off future shocks, to alleviate such socio-economic (and even climatic, for some of the people interviewed) uncertainty, and in the face of the absence of an assured, secure future.

16 We borrow this term from Abraham Franssen, who notes the emergence in Europe in the 1970s of a new conception of the welfare state, particularly in England and Germany. Abraham Franssen, “État social actif : une nouvelle grammaire des risques sociaux” in *Les ambivalences du risque*, edited by Yves Cartuyvels, Presses universitaires Saint-Louis Bruxelles, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pusi.3495>.

4. Lessons and recommendations

The findings presented in Chapters 2 and 3 can support the development of a new eco-social contract in several ways. Firstly, they provide an insight into how citizens perceive the current social contracts in the UK and France, allowing us to better characterise the status quo. In particular, this has led us to make revisions to two of the four pacts we proposed in our first report, [Towards a 21st Social Contract](#). Secondly, they give us hints as to the

challenges we might face, and opportunities we can draw on, when developing a new contract. Thirdly, they give us insights into how conversations about these topics play out with citizens, and allow us to make recommendations on how to ensure such conversations are conducted effectively. This chapter will bring together what we believe to be the most important of these lessons.

Modifications to representation of current social contract

Our initial framework was developed on the basis of a historical review of the development of the social contract in the UK and France. This framework was an attempt to structure and summarise the 'great promises' and collective arrangements that define our current society both systemically, and in specific domains of life. The interviews and focus groups provided an opportunity to explore the extent to which the pacts that we identified were recognised by citizens.

Two of the pacts were well reflected in the empirical work – the Work Pact and the Security Pact. However, the other two Pacts (the Democracy and the Consumption) did not resonate so clearly.

Consumption Pact

The original Consumption Pact held that citizens “accept a pervasive consumer pressure and a degree of inequality in exchange for the possibility to enhance [their] well-being and for the prosperity of society”. In the focus groups in the UK, expectations regarding the consumption pact were expressed in terms of the cost-of-living crisis – participants felt that it was the government’s duty to ensure that food, energy, housing and transport are affordable. Interviewees in France expressed sadness about not being able to meet aspirations such as going on holiday or going to restaurants as much as they would like. They also talked about shopping as a way to achieve wellbeing.

However, the obligations formulated in terms of accepting consumer pressure and inequality were not expressed so frequently in the focus groups. None of the participants saw consumption as something which had a negative impact on themselves personally (although they did recognise environmental impacts). None of them talked about the pressure to consume.

On the other hand, interviewees in France did criticise over-consumption and the desire to consume (e.g. “*And what bothers me is not that we consume too much, it’s that [the system] wants us to consume a lot*”): they seemed to question a system where it is both difficult to control the frequency of consumption (due to constant advertising and incentives to consume) and frustrating to not to have control over the ethics of products (e.g. quality and origin of products, production conditions) – even if, for the majority, consumption was common practice. This discrepancy between a critical mindset and seemingly uncritical consumption practices reveals the deep-rooted assimilation of consumer expectations – even if they are questioned in principle – and shows that people still see consumption as a route to happiness.

In addition, the people spoken to were ambivalent about the implications of inequality. They recognise, and often even regret, that inequalities are too high, which is consistent with research on attitudes towards inequality.^{17,18} But the hope of rising socially and standing out (in a society where owning a lot is interpreted as success, and where consumption is the social activity par excellence) is also visible: having more than others and achieving recognition, are desirable. From this perspective, a form of inequality is passively accepted – at least as long as the main lever of social value (consumption) remains the same – and it is seen as the price that we have to pay to ensure a society where people can consume more. Based on this, we have decided to reformulate the Consumption Pact as follows:

“We accept a certain degree of economic inequality and the increasing role of the market in exchange for being able to consume what we want, for the existence of ever-growing consumption possibilities and the possibility to demonstrate status through consumption”.

17 Deaton, A. (2024) *Dimensions of Inequality: The IFS Deaton Review* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

18 Norton, M. & Ariely, D. (2011) Building a Better America – One Wealth Quintile at a Time. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(1), 9-12

Democracy Pact

The original Democracy Pact held that citizens “forfeit having a direct political voice, in exchange for the possibility to elect representatives and for a society based on common laws”. However what participants and interviewees spoke about went far beyond these formal institutions. The pact is defined more by social expectations – fairness, accountability and a way to live together – than by the desire to exercise direct participation. It is also based on values, such as respect, or justice principles, such as equal conditions. These moral expectations also apply to political staff, who are expected to act transparently, be accountable and truly guarantee the interests of those they represent. In this regard, there is also a demand for representation: the interviewees are keen to ensure that political staff do not lose the ‘connection’ (a recurring verbatim) with those they represent. It can then be reformulated as follows:

‘We accept a democratic model whereby a political elite make decisions provided that those elites are accountable, transparent and represent our interests’;

The place of public services

Public services and the desire for collective security was highlighted in both France and the UK. Almost every conversation in the UK began with the National Health Service. To some extent, public services are at the heart of the social contract. This is consistent with the 3Ps model of government, which describes government’s roles in terms of protection, participation and provision.¹⁹ We however see public services as cutting across all, or at least, most of the pacts. For example, healthcare is part of the Work Pact (in terms of being part of the remuneration package we expect), but also part of the Security Pact (in terms of the government’s perceived role to protect us from health threats).

Challenges and opportunities in developing a new eco-social contract

We have not proposed a new eco-social contract yet, as we believe, like others, that this should be informed through public participation.²⁰ Nevertheless, in our first report, we tentatively laid out some of the challenges a new social contract must address, including the needs to strengthen democratic activity, to adapt to the increased risks of climate change, to provide good quality jobs, and to minimise the disproportionate importance of consumption through the market for achieving identity, status and wellbeing.

Whilst it was not a primary objective of this research, the comments made by participants in the focus groups and by interviewees provided some indication of the potential that a new citizen-informed social contract would be able to address these issues. We found their comments suggested many opportunities, but also a few challenges that would need to be overcome.

Opportunities

Citizens understand the concept of a social contract. They are able to formulate clear expectations of the state and understand that they have obligations towards it and towards society (FG). Often, they even spontaneously imagine social life through a contractual prism (interviews), contrasting gains and duties, promises and disappointments, efforts and rewards. They can realistically discuss these social balances and formulate

expectations in terms of justice. This shows that conversations based on this concept are meaningful and that there is a potential for citizens to express ideas that could inform a new eco-social contract.

Widespread feeling the current contract is not being respected, neither by the state nor by other citizens. This dissatisfaction with the state of the current social contract should make it easier to motivate engagement to develop a new one.

Sense of collective and concern for inequality. Participants and interviewees regularly referred to collective benefits of the social contract, and saw value in what works at the moment (for example in terms of having state-organised health care). They also showed concern for inequalities within society. These collectivist sensitivities highlight the potential for new societal agreements and show that solidarity is still an important part of our society.

Work is seen as a key source of recognition and status. Contributing to society through work is seen as a key obligation, and citizens look for status and recognition through their work. Whilst this could potentially represent a challenge in a future where artificial intelligence may make many of us redundant, it also shows how important people see the need to contribute to human activity, and challenges the gloomy perspective that people

¹⁹ Mayall, B. (2000). The sociology of childhood in relation to children’s rights. *The International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 8, 243–259

²⁰ For example see Abdallah S, Bengtsson M, Akenji L, Saujout M, Nasr C & Bet M (2023) *It’s time for a new social contract*. <https://hotorcool.org/hc-posts/its-time-for-a-new-social-contract>; Mohamed, N. (2023) *Building New Social Contracts: An Overview of Participatory Mechanisms for Economic Governance*. Green Economy Coalition; Willis, R. (2020). A social contract for the climate crisis. *IPPR Progressive Review*, 27(2), 156–164. <https://doi.org/10.1111/newe.12202>.

in the 21st century seek recognition more by what they consume than by what they produce.²¹ The opportunity in a new eco-social contract is to reframe what defines 'good' work. The FGs already highlighted a tendency to value work that contributes to society – for example healthcare or policing. It would only be a small step to include, for example, environmental considerations, in the common understanding of what counts as a good job.

Expectations regarding security go beyond law and order.

Citizens expect the state to play a role in ensuring their security. This goes beyond physical safety, to include factors like social security, healthy environments (for example playing a role in managing the risks from smoking) and promotion of healthy behaviours. In the FGs, there was also discussion of tougher enforcement of environmental laws, for example regarding littering and tipping. This suggests that the idea that the state has a duty to protect us against climate change is not that alien to citizens, and could be more explicitly built into a social contract.

High expectations of public services. We were struck by the fact that citizens continue to have high expectations regarding public services (even though there is a perception portrayed in the media that they have been severely eroded). The deterioration of public services generates much anxiety and insecurity, and has a negative impact on people's relationship with democracy. This highlights the importance of considering public services and the key role they can play in the democratic rebuilding of a social contract.

Dissatisfaction with democracy. There was dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of honesty and accountability amongst political figures, and with the social disconnect between elites and citizens. Although citizens did not explicitly derive from this, a dissatisfaction with the democratic system in general, they did sense that politicians do not accurately represent them. This perceived lack of representation provides an opening for discussing alternative democratic systems, involving greater citizen participation.

Whilst the above findings hint at opportunities for developing a new social contract, there were several findings which suggested that achieving one that respects environmental limits might prove challenging.

Challenges

Consumption seen as a source of individual wellbeing. The interviews in particular highlighted how important consumption, both of basic goods but also luxuries, is to current narratives around wellbeing. The 'obligations' we initially hypothesised in the consumption pact were only sporadically mentioned. This

suggests that a new eco-social contract that would lead to lower consumption levels would be seen first and foremost by citizens as a sacrifice. To avoid this, we need a reformulation of what counts as wellbeing, a reframing of the possible benefits of lower consumption, and a reflection on how the other pacts could contribute more to social fulfilment. Clues to opportunities also emerged in the interviews, with several interviewees highlighting the lack of autonomy and the ethical discomfort they feel that consumer pressure and industrial production lead to in terms of consumption patterns.

Resistance to policies that are seen as taking away freedom.

Participants had mixed feelings about policies that restrict freedom (FG), from smoking to home-schooling. There was a feeling of discomfort at the idea that the government can tell people what they can and can't do. However, this often led to healthy discussions and there was usually a nuance to this perspective: citizens broadly acknowledged that it is appropriate for freedoms to be restricted if they have potential to harm other people, or if they undermine certain issues of justice (interviews). The challenge is to ensure that unsustainable consumption patterns are indeed seen as harming others to a degree that permits their regulation.

Sustainability issues discussed as obligations rather than expectations (FGs).

This is somewhat surprising, as it implies that citizens do not expect government to play the main role in ensuring a sustainable society. It implies that citizens have internalised the "responsible consumer" narrative, believing that the key pathway to sustainability is for individuals to 'choose' to live sustainably and revealing the prominence of the narrative of the individual as the main agent of the environmental transition. Research has demonstrated that this is not sufficient.²² Framing conversations around a new eco-social contract which places more responsibility on the state may therefore not come across as intuitive to many citizens. Nevertheless, in other contexts (e.g. climate assemblies), citizens do identify a clear role for the State in the sustainability transition. Furthermore, the awareness of the role that lifestyles have in terms of achieving sustainability was promising, with conversations moving beyond simply recycling and turning lights off. There was also an awareness of the importance of addressing mass action problems (i.e. ensuring that the relatively minor impact of one single person's behaviour does not lead to inaction). As such, discussions regarding sustainability in the focus groups and interviews did suggest that an eco-social contract is indeed possible.

The feeling that some people receive too much support. While citizens often showed themselves to be attentive to issues of justice and inequality, the scarcity and erosion of public services and resources nonetheless generates a feeling of social competition, or the feeling that you have to fight against others to

21 Jackson, T. (2021) *Post Growth: Life after Capitalism* (Wiley John & Sons)

22 Saujot M, Nasr C., Brocard C., Bet M., Dubuisson-Quellier S. & Plessz M. (2024) "When you can, you want to": Social conditions for achieving the ecological transition: a lifestyle approach. <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/issue-brief/when-you-can-you-want-social-conditions-achieving-ecological>

be protected or considered. This is detrimental to the collective development of consensus or compromise on the transition. We may have to conclude from this that formalising a system of fair compensation and recognition for all (topical issues in a

social contract), as well as a collective debate on public services, are an essential prerequisite to the discussion as such of an ecological contract.

Lessons for future deliberations

Lastly, the experience of conducting conversations provided some clues on how to better discuss the social contract with citizens. This is particularly useful in informing potential citizen participation on the topic.

1) It is possible to explicitly talk about the social contract in deliberative discussions with citizens. As noted, citizens can discuss expectations and obligations meaningfully. Some participants in FGs did adopt positions which could be seen as fiscally untenable (e.g. lower taxes and more public services), or sociologically unlikely (e.g. everyone can get rich if they work hard). But these positions were often challenged by other participants. This highlights the value of group conversations and of bringing together people with different political perspectives.

2) Participants are more easily able to reflect on their understanding of the social contract when asked to draw from lived experience. Abstract concepts and compromises at the societal level do not usually come automatically to mind to the general public. Asking about 'life stories' and concrete biographical experiences or routines provides a helpful entry point for discussions about the social contract and can help people articulate opinions.

3) Participants require encouragement to move past the negative and on to the successful aspects of the social contract. In the focus groups, the conversations often focused on how the current social contract was *not* working, i.e. what the government *does not* provide or what citizens *do not* do. To provide a holistic understanding of how the social contract is conceived, participants were explicitly asked to examine both what works and what doesn't, but the bias sometimes remained. A recommendation for future conversations would be to first focus on what works, before broadening to more general questions about what should happen. For example, participants could first be asked what government provides, before being asked what government should provide. Counterfactuals can be used – for example, what would happen if the state ceased to exist tomorrow? Another heuristic used informally during the focus groups, and which proved useful, was to ask participants what a 'bad citizen' does to help them understand their conception of a good citizen. It would also be interesting to confront the people interviewed with objective data and/or figures (insecurity figures, surveys on changes in social ties, etc.), which are sometimes at odds with the common feeling, and to understand what actually generates this feeling.

4) Group discussion is recommended to bring out the collective dimensions of our expectations and practices. In group conversations, participants rarely put forward purely selfish arguments. For example, they did not say "I don't want to pay such high taxes, because I want more money for myself", but rather, "It's not fair that people who work hard should have to pay so much of their earnings as tax". This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it means that proposals and conclusions that emerge from group conversations are likely to reflect more pro-social and collective perspectives than, for example, proposals emerging from individualised voting or surveys. On the other hand, there is a risk that participants may 'hide' their more selfish tendencies, meaning that proposals and conclusions may be more pro-social and collective than many individuals may feel comfortable with.

5) Some Pacts (consumption, democracy) require more targeted probing than others. To encourage discussion on certain pacts, it is useful to take a number of detours to gain access to real consumer practices and expectations. Tackling them head-on ('what do you consume?') tends to give rise to a discourse of sobriety that is not always faithful to reality ('I don't consume much'; 'I'm not very materialistic' etc.). Another good method is to go back to recent activities or practices. An example of a question that could be asked to get around the obvious theme would be: 'Is there anything (a material good, an activity, a service, etc.) that you bought yourself recently that you particularly enjoyed? why? what would you miss if you hadn't made that purchase?'; or conversely: 'Is there anything that you bought yourself recently that you ended up regretting? Why?'. Or: "Last Friday was a bank holiday. What did you do?".

6) To make visible the economic realities that underpin the social contract, specific tools and resources are required. Economic themes were surprisingly absent from the focus groups. No participant mentioned economic growth as an expectation of government. Although the cost of living was frequently mentioned, participants' expectations of government in the focus groups mentioned instruments such as price controls, rather than government investment or taxation. If we wish to address economic issues in deliberation, we will therefore need to bring in external resources and expertise in order to make visible the economic realities that make up our social contract, and to fuel the debate.

