A few weeks after the return of the Howard Government, in November 2001, I was invited to speak at a joint meeting in Canberra of the Academy of Humanities in Australia and the Academy of the Social Sciences. At that time, the Prime Minister’s reputation as a man who fashioned his policies on the basis of opinion polls was at its height; not long before no less a figure than Paul Kelly, the country’s most distinguished political journalist, had described John Howard as ‘the most knee-jerk, poll-reactive, populist prime minister in the past 50 years’ (2000). Many in the audience were convinced that this was precisely how Howard had fashioned his government’s policies on a whole raft of issues, not least those to do with ‘race’; that it was on the basis of such policies, especially in relation to refugees, that his government had been returned; and for doing it they considered him deserving of the deepest disapprobation.

Shortly before the Howard Government announced, on February 18, that Australia would join the United States and Britain in their attempt to disarm Iraq, I was invited to Canberra by another group of academics concerned that Howard was about to embroil Australia in a conflict without the formal authorisation of the Parliament; that far from following public opinion on the issue he was prepared to defy it; and that even for contemplating such a course they considered him deserving of the deepest disapprobation.

What a difference an issue makes. ‘The very people who a month ago were
snorking on about John Howard being poll-driven’, one columnist observed after the United States-led coalition had gone to war, ‘are the ones who are now complaining that he’s deaf to the demonstrators’ (Ruehl, 2003). Not Kelly. He had a different line in chutzpah. Insisting that for Howard to ‘abandon his position’ in the face of ‘such large marches’ would be ‘neither democratic nor wise’, Kelly went on to chastise those peace-marchers who ‘merely want Howard to behave according to the populist parody of him that they have created’ (2003b).

The question of what, if anything, governments should do in relation to public opinion is integral to any discussion of democracy and therefore to any discussion of a ‘democratic deficit’. But before I turn to this concept, or attempt to link it to public opinion and to the Government’s position on the war, I need to say something about the state of public opinion itself - or at least about the state of polled opinion - during the months leading up to Australia’s formal commitment, when the Prime Minister was insisting that questions about war were entirely ‘hypothetical’, through to the end of the war itself.

In the first part of the paper I argue that opinion on American involvement was fairly evenly divided; that at least until the start of the war, on most measures – but not all - opponents of an Australian engagement outnumbered supporters, the more so where pollsters did not push respondents to declare themselves one or the other; and that much of the polling suggested that opinion on the war hinged on the United Nations, with support rising at the prospect of a UN endorsement and falling away sharply at the prospect of UN opposition. The second part argues that the concept of a ‘democratic deficit’, far from being an integral part of any democratic discourse, is part of a discourse about democracy in supra-national entities that has its roots in the European Community; that the concept does not necessarily entail the idea that specific public policies should enjoy widespread public support; but if that is to be a requirement, the quality of the opinion that such a thesis seeks to empower needs to be assessed. And in the third part I argue that some of the apparent incoherence of polled opinion on issues to do with the war may have been a product of the polls rather than a predicate of the public; that the polls on how public opinion would react if the UN failed to endorse a war were especially misleading; and that these and other shortcomings of the polls conducted for the press make it difficult to assess the quality of opinion the polls were reporting. The paper concludes with some reflections on the calls that were
made for a referendum, some remarks about polls as a tool of popular empowerment, and some speculations on the ways in which the Prime Minister read public opinion.

The Polls

Polling organisations in Australia started to ask questions about a possible war in Iraq soon after the Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, warned that the world could no longer afford to appease Iraq and after the Prime Minister indicated that if Australia were to receive a request to help in a US-led attack it would be considered on its merits. That was in July. Between the second week in August and the end of the war in April, while the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne *Age* (owned by John Fairfax & Sons) commissioned just two questions from ACNielsen, the *Australian, Sunday Telegraph* (both owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Ltd) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) commissioned thirty-two from Newspoll – an organisation half-owned by News Limited and half-owned by another market research agency Millward Brown, and the most closely watched poll in the land.¹

Two other companies - Hawker Britton, and Roy Morgan Research - also published national polls, independently of the press. The Hawker Britton-UMR poll, the newest on the block, represented the coming together of Hawker Britton, a political consultancy associated with Labor, and a market research firm, UMR Research, that polled for Labor. Morgan, which years earlier had polled for the Liberals, was the oldest player on the block. Conceived during World War II by Sir Keith Murdoch at the Herald and Weekly Times, it had reported public opinion in several wars. Until the end of 2001, when its election forecast had been spectacularly wrong (Goot, 2002: 80-90), Morgan had polled since 1996 for the *Bulletin*, owned by Kerry Packer’s Consolidated Press

Polling was not only reasonably extensive; it was relatively intense. Before the war, fifty-two questions on Iraq had been included in published polls taken nation-wide; the war itself, which lasted four weeks, saw sixteen more, fourteen of these in the first nine days. In the four months leading up to the first war with Iraq, in 1991, no more than twenty-one questions had been asked nation-wide, most in just two polls; during the war itself, which lasted six weeks, only ten questions on the war were included in nation-wide polls (Goot, 1992: 143).
What did respondents think of the United States going to war against Iraq? Did they think Australia should join in? And what differences did the polls register when respondents were asked either about a war that met with United Nations approval or about a war that did not? In one form or another, these were the key issues the polls addressed.

In addressing them, the polls adopted a fairly uniform approach. Typically, they set out to interview cross-sections of resident adults, drawing fresh samples every time – Morgan interviewing samples of 400 to 1,000; Hawker Britton-UMR, 1,000; Newspoll, 700 to 1200; and ACNielsen, 1,400 to 2,100. They conducted their interviews by telephone – if not the best method of sampling, certainly the quickest way of reporting a result. And, in the style of a referendum, the questions they asked almost always restricted respondents to a binary choice – one that not only did not invite respondents to sit on the fence (‘don’t know’, ‘don’t care’, ‘can’t decide’), but that positively discouraged them from doing so. The effect of this approach was to conflate genuine opinion with non-opinion, and to boost both the proportion said to be in favour of a proposition and the proportion said to be against – though to what degree, with one or two notable exceptions, is impossible to say.

American involvement

How did Australians view the possibility of an American attack on Iraq? Before the war, three questions were asked about this; once America had attacked, there were two more. At first, opinion was divided. In September, a Morgan sample split 45: 47 over ‘the use of an American force against Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein’; over ‘the United States military launching an attack on Iraq’, Newspoll reported a 33: 47 split (Morgan 2002a, Vass, 2003). The higher proportion of ‘undecided’ respondents reported by Newspoll (20 per cent) compared to Morgan (8 per cent) may have had something to do with the fact that whereas Morgan had suggested a reason for the attack (and guaranteed an outcome?) Newspoll had not. Both polls reported the same level of opposition; Morgan’s smaller proportion of ‘undecided’ respondents boosted the level of support for, not the level of opposition to, an American attack.

Subsequent Morgan polls (Morag 2002c, 2003b, 2003c) reported increased levels of support: in December, a plurality (49: 43) in favour of an
American attack; in March, after the outbreak of war, a majority (51.5 and 52 per cent). But the movement in favour of the Americans – seven percentage points between mid-September and mid-March - may have been smaller than these figures suggests. Morgan’s samples were generally small, the number of respondents ranging from 408 to 682. Moreover, in March its samples were drawn not from people aged 14 plus, as they were in September, but from electors; and teenagers, a subsequent Newspoll suggests, were much less likely than older respondents to support a war (O’Keefe, 2003).

**Australia’s commitment**

Did Australians want their forces to be part of a US-led attack on Iraq? First asked in August, questions of this kind were asked more frequently than any other question on Iraq. On six occasions, Hawker Britton-UMR asked whether respondents approved or disapproved ‘Australian armed forces participating in a United States led attack on Iraq’, five before and once after the attack. On five occasions before the war, Newspoll asked respondents to think about ‘Australia’s involvement in possible US led action against Iraq with the objective of deposing Saddam Hussein’ before asking them (once without this preamble) whether they personally would be ‘in favour or against Australian forces being part of any US led military action against Iraq’; with the war underway, it deleted its reference to the United States and, on four occasions, asked about ‘Australian troops being involved in military action against Iraq’. Morgan, too, asked ‘about Australians being part of an American military force’ and whether, ‘[i]f military action goes ahead against Iraq’, Australia should be ‘part of the American military force.’ This question was asked twice before the war and twice while the war was underway. At the behest of Gallup International, Morgan also asked, in January, if ‘military action goes ahead against Iraq’, whether ‘Australia should or should not support this action.’

Before the war, the answer to the question about Australia’s involvement with the United States was all but unequivocal: across a dozen polls, none showed majority support. Over half of those interviewed (54 per cent on average) opposed the idea; only a third (36 per cent) supported it; and around these averages the range was narrow. Despite talk, prior to the war, of increasing opposition – according to some reports, 500,000 marched on 16 February in anti-war demonstrations around the country (Priest, 2003) – the polls revealed no clear trend in either the extent of opposition or its
strength. From August to January, according to Newspoll, those strongly opposed consistently outnumbered those strongly in favour by about two-to-one (Kerin, 2002; Horin, 2002). In September and December, Morgan recorded a similar result, although in its second poll the gap between strong supporters and strong opponents had narrowed (Morgan 2002a, 2002c).

The polls suggested not only that Australians did not want to be part of an American-led force, but that American efforts to stitch up a ‘coalition of the willing’ and Australia’s apparent willingness to go along with it had damaged the image of the Australian Government vis-à-vis America and the American Government vis-à-vis Australia. In May 2001, on the fiftieth anniversary of the ANZUS, almost all (92 per cent) of those interviewed in a poll commissioned by the Americans thought Australia-US relations were in ‘good shape’ (Marshall, 2001). But by August 2002, and again in October, Hawker Britton-UMR found opinion evenly split between those who thought ‘the current level of support for United States foreign policy’ was ‘about right’ or ‘not enough’ (43-46 per cent) and those who thought it was actually ‘too much’ (45-47 per cent). Asked by Morgan, mid-January 2003, whether ‘generally’ they thought ‘American foreign policy has a positive effect on Australia, a negative effect’ or ‘no effect’, the majority of respondents (51 per cent) said it had a ‘negative’ effect; only a third (31 per cent) thought the effect was generally ‘positive’ (Morgan, 2003a). And when ACNielsen, around the same time, asked respondents whether Iraq or North Korea was the ‘greater threat to world peace’ opinion was evenly divided (Allard, 2003a). What would the figures have looked like, one cannot help wondering, if to its short list of Iraq and North Korea, ACNielsen had been brave enough to add the United States?

While all the polls showed respondents opposed to Australia’s joining a US-led war on Iraq, Newspoll and Morgan showed a much narrower gap than did Hawker Britton-UMR. According to the Newspoll series and/or Morgan series, which ran from August to December, the level of opposition to the war was seven-to-seventeen points greater than the level of support; but the Hawker Britton-UMR poll, conducted five times between August to March, put the level of opposition 25 to 30 points ahead (except in November when, mysteriously, the gap dropped to fourteen).

The most obvious difference between Newspoll and Morgan, on the one side, and Hawker Britton-UMR, on the other, was the proportion of ‘undecided’ respondents: Newspoll (9.5 per cent) and Morgan (4.5 per cent)
reported fewer than Hawker Britton-UMR (12.5 per cent) – though the
Hawker Britton-UMR figure dropped to 7 per cent once the war
commenced. As we have already observed in relation to polls on America’s
going to war, a high ‘undecided’ had an asymmetrical effect: for the most
part it pulled respondents away from war camp rather than the peace camp.
Support for going to war was not only a minority position; the minority was
‘softer’ than the majority. As both Newspoll and Morgan show (Hawker
Britton generated no data on this) those who supported war were less likely
to be strong supporters than those who opposed war were likely to be strong
opponents.

The reason Hawker Britton-UMR reported more ‘undecided’ respondents
than did Newspoll or Morgan almost certainly lies in the way each
organisation treated respondents reluctant to endorse either of the
alternatives on offer. When those interviewed by Hawker Britton-UMR
responded to the question of Australia’s involvement by saying ‘it depends’,
they were recorded as saying ‘it depends’. When respondents in the
Newspoll surveys said ‘it depends’, interviewers read them the question
again, and (if necessary) again; only if they still refused to come down on
one side or the other were interviewers allowed to lump them in with the
‘don’t knows’ and ‘don’t cares’ as ‘uncommitted’. When respondents in the
Morgan surveys hesitated they were asked which way they were ‘leaning’.
Not surprisingly, the proportion recorded either as ‘it depends’ or ‘unsure’
by Hawker Britton-UMR almost always exceeded those recorded as
‘uncommitted’ by Newspoll or as ‘can’t says’ by Morgan.

The only question to register majority support for an Australian
commitment was one Morgan posed in January. ‘If military action goes
ahead’, respondents were asked, ‘do you think Australia should or should
not support this action’? Opinion divided 53: 40 (Morgan, 2003a). There
was no reference to America. The significance of this poll, grasped neither
by Morgan nor by the media, is something to which we shall return.

Once the war commenced, opinion in all the polls shifted. Exactly how far
is difficult to say: the polls are at odds. But shift they did – and in favour of
Australia’s commitment. In a poll taken the day after the Prime Minister’s
March 18 announcement that Australian forces would fight, Morgan
reported that almost as many respondents approved ‘Australia’s being part
of the American military force’ (46.5 per cent) as disapproved (48.5 per
cent); these figures were little different from the 45: 52 figure generated by
the same question in December in a poll that included respondents aged 14-17. However, towards the end of the first week of the war signs of a shift seemed more certain: a smaller Morgan sample split 50.5: 46 (Morgan, 2003b, 2003c).

More dramatic was the shift reported by Hawker Britton-UMR. In the first week of March, it found only a third (32 per cent) in favour of ‘Australian armed forces participating in a United States led attack on Iraq’; by the end of March – the end of the first week of the war – the proportion in favour had jumped to half (51 per cent), a shift of nineteen percentage points.

The Australian, a strong supporter of American intervention, also trumpeted a ‘dramatic shift’ in favour of the Australian commitment when it reported the first Newspoll of the war (Shanahan, 2003d). But the note struck by the paper was not one that had been written into the pollster’s score. According to Newspoll, opinion on ‘Australian troops being involved in military action against Iraq’ was evenly divided, 45:47. This was virtually the same result, 46.5:48.5, as Morgan obtained in its first poll of the war. And the Morgan result, as we have seen, was not very different to its December figure. The paper’s mistake was to compare the 45:47 figure, obtained by Newspoll, with the previous Newspoll, conducted just before the war, when opinion divided 25:68 - not over ‘Australian troops being involved in military action against Iraq’, but over whether Australian troops should be involved in military action against Iraq ‘if the United Nations did not support military action’. For Dennis Shanahan, the paper’s political editor, the poll indicated a shift, in a matter of days, of twenty percentage points. But the questions were not commensurate. A question that refers to the UN not supporting a particular action is not the same as a question about actions that respondents may or may not believe the UN does not support.

Nonetheless, with the war underway, successive samplings by Newspoll did indicate growing support for Australia’s involvement, diminishing opposition, or both. A 45:47 split on 19-20 March became a 50:42 split on 21-23 March, a 51:38 split on 28-30 March, and a 57:36 split towards war’s end, on 11-13 April (Shanahan, 2003d, 2003e; Lewis, 2003a, 2003b). At the beginning of the war, Newspoll reported a margin of two percentage points against Australian involvement; after four days of fighting, the margin was eight points in favour of an Australian involvement; after ten days, thirteen points; and after three and a half weeks, twenty-one points. If not in the same league as Hawker Britton-UMR, which saw a deficit of 27
percentage points at the beginning of March converted into a lead of nine points by the end of March, these figures certainly pointed in the same direction.

The United Nations

What happened to opinion when the United Nations entered the equation? No aspect of the polling was more interesting, or more deceptive, than this. From September, if not earlier, the UN seemed pivotal to the prospect – or at least the politics - of war. Nonetheless, questions about the UN were not especially prominent in the polls. Between August and February, polls focused on Australia and/or the United States - not on Australia, the US and the UN. Of the questions asked about Australian and/or American involvement in any war, and the place of the UN in sanctioning such a war, the number on Australia and/or the US (fourteen) was twice as great as the number about Australia and the UN.

If the polls placed greater emphasis on the Government’s position than on the Opposition’s, one reason for doing so may have been the realisation that if Australia were going to war it was more likely to be on John Howard’s terms than on Simon Crean’s. However, there was always some uncertainty about what the Opposition’s position actually was. While Howard was keen to have UN support, he had made it reasonably clear from the outset that Australia’s decision would not necessarily depend on such support. But for months, Crean continued to say both that Labor would not support a decision to go to war in defiance of the UN and that it was keeping its options open in case a compelling case for war could be made (Akerman, 2003).

By leaving the United Nations largely out of the reckoning for much of the time the polls ran the risk of measuring support for war in ways that were incomplete or misleading. However, with the war underway it looked increasingly as if it had been the questions on the UN that had been misleading – especially questions framed around the possibility that the UN would not sanction war – rather than the questions that left the UN out.

Newspoll asked three questions on the UN in September, then nothing on the UN until the end of January; between then and the war, however, it asked no fewer than seven. Hawker Britton-UMR asked about the UN twice between August and November, and it repeated its question in March.
Morgan did not raise the UN until late January, and then only because it was responsible for the Australian leg of a Gallup International project in which a question about the UN was embedded. ACNielsen, commissioned before the war to ask just one question on Iraq - it asked a second question off its own bat – focused both its questions on the UN.

Where questions did refer to the UN, the impact was marked. If most respondents said they were not going to support a war against Iraq in which Australia simply joined the United States, even fewer put up their hands when polls posed the possibility of the UN opposing military action. When Newspoll asked respondents whether they would be in ‘favour or against Australia’s involvement in military action if the United Nations had not given approval for it’, no more than a fifth (19 per cent in September, 18 per cent in early February), rising to a quarter (22 per cent at the end of February/beginning of March, and 25 per cent a week before the war) of those interviewed said they would favour Australia’s involvement (Vass, 2002; Shanahan, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). This was substantially less than the proportion telling interviewers that they supported Australia’s involvement in action against Iraq led by the United States.

When Morgan, in January, asked whether respondents favoured ‘military action against Iraq under no circumstances, only if sanctioned by the United Nations or unilaterally by America and its allies’, more than half (56 per cent) said ‘only if sanctioned by the United Nations’; the proportion prepared to back ‘unilateral’ military action ‘by America and its allies’ was just 12 per cent (Morgan, 2002a). And when ACNielsen, again in January, offered respondents three choices - to go to war ‘only as part of a United Nations approved force’; to go to war ‘even if the United Nations does not approve’; or not to be ‘involved in a war against Iraq’ – nearly two-thirds of those interviewed (62 per cent) said Australia should fight ‘only as part of a United Nations approved force’; 30 per cent thought Australia should not be ‘involved in a war’; a mere 6 per cent wanted to fight ‘even if the United Nations does not approve’ (Kitney, 2003a).

For supporters of war, polls like these occasioned some alarm. One columnist in the Australian feared that what her paper’s own poll had revealed was that ‘most Australians will blindly defer to the UN’, something that exposed ‘a lack of logic, to say nothing of moral abdication’ (Albrechtsen, 2003); an editorial in the paper praised the Prime Minister for not being swayed by such polls, not because they reflected
opinions deficient in logic or morality but because ‘governments are elected to enact policies in the national interest, popular or not’ (Australian, 19 February). For opponents of the war such polls afforded considerable comfort. One Sydney Morning Herald journalist got quite carried away: ‘according to some reliable polls’, he claimed, ‘somewhere between 80 and 90 per cent...do not want war without the UN’ (Seccombe, 2003). Findings like those in the ACNielsen poll, one of his colleagues observed, helped explain why Crean had ‘edged closer to all out opposition to Australian troops going to Iraq’ (Kitney, 2003a), though why widespread opposition to war without the UN’s say-so should have made Crean wary of war even with the UN’s say-so was nowhere made clear.

What if neither the United States nor the UN were able ‘to present firm evidence’ that Iraq had ‘a nuclear weapon capability’? This question also lowered support for war. In September, two-thirds (65 per cent) of Newspoll’s respondents said that they would be against ‘a military campaign being launched’; nearly half (44 per cent) said they would be ‘strongly’ against such action (Vass, 2002).

While the UN’s opposition to war, or its failure to establish a just cause, appeared to decrease support for Australia’s involvement, the UN’s support for a war just as surely increased it. And not just in Australia. In Britain, the head of one polling organisation described the difference between going to war without the UN’s support and going to war with the UN’s support ‘as one of the most remarkable switches of public opinion that MORI has ever measured’ (Worcester, 2002). Faced with the prospect of United Nations backing for a war, most respondents fell into line. In October, November, and at the beginning of March, when Hawker Britton-UMR asked respondents to ‘suppose the UN Security Council supports military action against Iraq’, the majority (52 per cent rising to 64 per cent) said they would approve of ‘Australian armed forces participating in this action’. Between the end of January and mid-March, Newspoll, too, reported majority support (57 per cent rising to 61 per cent) for ‘military actions against Iraq if the United Nations supported such actions’. Even the prospect of Saddam Hussein’s allowing the UN weapons inspectors less than unconditional access seemed enough to convert majority opposition into majority support. Thus, in September, at a time when Newspoll was reporting that respondents opposed ‘Australia’s involvement in a possible US-led action against Iraq’, it was also reporting that for the majority of respondents (55 per cent) ‘If Iraq changed its decision to allow unconditional access to
United Nations inspectors’ then ‘military intervention by the United Nations’ would be justified (Vass, 2002).

Were there any trends in the data? There were, but until the last weeks before the war they were not entirely clear. At the beginning of February, according to Newspoll, attitudes to an Australian commitment to a war that lacked UN support were precisely where they had been in September; only in March was there any sign of a shift. Conversely, the level of support for an Australian commitment if the UN did sign off was no greater at the beginning of March than it had been at the end of January; not until a Newspoll taken days before the war was there a noticeable shift. Hawker Britton-UMR was the only poll to detect an earlier shift. It reported a lift in support between October and November just as great (six percentage points) as the one it reported between November and March.

The Democratic Deficit

A ‘democratic deficit’ might be defined as the gap between the democratic ideal and the daily reality of democratic life. While the underlying idea is as old as democratic government itself, this way of expressing it is new. The origin of the phrase lies within the European Community; specifically, in debates about the relationship between economic and political integration in general and the legitimacy of non-majoritarian institutions in particular triggered by the establishment of the European Council and the European Parliament (Majone, 1998: 5).

Beyond the European Community and international organisations more generally (cf. Dahl, 1999: 34, McGrew, 2002: 273), the application of the phrase has been quite circumscribed. Barry Hindess relays ‘a widespread perception that the problem of the democratic deficit is getting worse’ (1997: 85). But ‘democratic deficit’ is not a phrase that finds much place in the burgeoning literature on deliberative democracy, among contemporary writings on direct democracy or in reports from those involved in democratic audits, where the performance of actually existing democracies are measured against a number of democratic criteria (cf. Weir and Beetham, 1999).

To call a gap between democratic theory and democratic practice a ‘democratic deficit’ begs a key question: against what yardsticks are democratic practices to be measured? In the context of the European Union
it is possible to identify three quite different sets of standards relating to claims about a democratic deficit (Majone, 1998: 6-7): standards based on national institutions (for example, the argument that the European Parliament should be able to initiate legislation because national parliaments can); majoritarian standards derived from a theoretical model (the argument, for example, that the European Parliament should be directly elected and its powers increased); and standards derived from the democratic legitimacy of member states (for example, the argument that in place of majority voting, member states should have a power of veto).

It is not only in Europe, of course, that standards of democracy are contested. In the theoretical literature the range of possible democratic arrangements – and therefore of possible democratic deficits – is wider than the range of remedies usually canvassed in the European debate. At one extreme lies the democratic ideal famously articulated by the political economist Joseph Schumpeter: ‘that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote’ (1943: 269). At the other lies the ideal of direct democracy, defined by Ian Budge, in a recent defence, as ‘a regime in which adult citizens as a whole debate and vote on the most important political decisions, and where their vote determines the action to be taken’ (1996: 35).

Between these two ideals lies a chasm – not least in relation to arguments about the place of public opinion. On Schumpeter’s view, voters elect the government and, come the next election, can re-elect it if they choose. The idea of an election as some sort of transmission belt for the voter’s will on almost any issue, including issues of war and peace, was one that Schumpeter dismissed out of hand: ‘national and international affairs’ that lacked a ‘direct and unmistakable link’ with ‘private concerns’, he argued, were matters on which, typically, even the best educated citizens lacked interest, were unqualified to judge, and failed conspicuously to apply the rules of reasoning that governed other aspects of their lives (1943: 261-2). By contrast, a direct democrat sees elections as only part of the process, and a small part at that. Budge, for example, sees arguments against involving voters directly in government as largely ‘illogical’ – nothing less than a denial of the case for the franchise itself - amounting to little more than a defence of ‘elective dictatorship’ (1996: 190-3).

Between elections, on the Schumpeterian view, public opinion has little
place. Governments, choosing to be prudent, might follow Victor Adler’s advice that ‘it was better to be wrong with the people than right against them’ (cited in Howard, 1981: 83). But nothing obliges governments to stay right with the people. Voters judge policy – more correctly, policy outcomes - retrospectively. On this view, the inability of the parties to anticipate developments after an election - war with Iraq, for example - creates no particular problem. And this view of democracy, variously described as ‘elitist’ or ‘realist’, is hardly an isolated one. As an account of how, in liberal democracies, governments should work - not least in relation to issues of war (cf. Lippmann, 1955: ch. 2; Luard, 1962: 162) - or of how voters determine their vote (cf. Fiorina, 1981), it has wide support. In rejecting calls for a referendum on the war, Howard himself said: ‘if you don’t like what [governments] are doing, then you vote them out of office’ (Tingle, 2003b). And a recent study of post-war American Presidents found that while seven of the ten ‘subscribed to the importance of public opinion’ only two agreed that ‘public opinion should affect foreign policy decisions’ (Foyle, 1999: 274).

As Hindess acknowledges, somewhat regretfully, ‘[i]f representative government provides the predominant modern understanding of democracy, the democratic deficit is an integral part of its design’ (2002: 30). On the other hand, if an ideal democracy is one in which public opinion is transmitted from the bottom and implemented at the top, we have to reconcile ourselves to the possibility of perverse outcomes. If the majority of voters in the European Community ‘oppose the idea of a European super-state, while supporting far-reaching economic integration…we are forced to conclude that, paradoxically, Europe’s “democratic deficit”, as the expression is usually understood, is democratically justified’ (Majone, 1998: 7).

Of course, to decry the existence of a democratic deficit is not necessarily to desire a system of democracy that converts the ‘will of the people’ into public policy. None of the standards of democracy outlined by Majone, and against which its critics variously find the European Community wanting, entails anything like this (but cf. Katz, 2001; Moravcsik, 2002). Nor do any of the remedies for the democratic deficit listed by Hindess - ‘industrial democracy, a significantly more active citizenry, an expanded role for civil society and the democratisation of major organisations within it, the devolution of governmental tasks to self-governing associations of citizens, and cosmopolitan democracy’ (1997: 84) - imply anything of this kind.
If democratic regimes should be responsive to public opinion – if one believes that ‘[a]ccording to a central strand of democratic theory, the policy preferences of ordinary citizens are supposed to form the foundation of government decision making (Page and Shapiro, 1992: 1); or if, as another American scholar once put it, ‘it is certainly more in keeping with the democratic ideal that the people should push a reluctant congress into war than that the Congress should pull a reluctant people into war (Bailey, 1948: 6) - to what sort of public opinion should a government respond? Should a government accept at face value whatever the polls show (Gallup and Rae, 1940: ch. 2)? Not necessarily. As Michael Howard shows, while liberal theories of international relations have long assumed that peace depends on the spread of democracy, they also assume that a peace-loving public needs to be an educated or enlightened one (1981: 31, 66, 77). Should polled opinion only be taken seriously, then, when it represents what Daniel Yankelovich calls ‘public judgment’, a collective decision taken only after people have ‘engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make’ (1991: 6)? Or is it reasonable to settle for some other measures of quality (cf. Price and Neijens, 1997)?

The Polls and the Democratic Deficit

Let me try to link the analysis of public opinion on the war with some notion of a democratic deficit, one that takes a radical turn by bringing the concept into line with the idea that in a genuine democracy public policy ought to reflect citizens’ policy preferences.

A number of propositions to do with Iraq constituted common ground between the Howard Government and the public. Asked, almost a year after September 11, about their ‘biggest concerns over the next three years’, many (41 per cent) of those interviewed by ACNielsen (2002), nominated ‘a renewal of global terrorist attacks’ (from a list that included health, a worsening of the economy, corporate crime, job insecurity, and violent crime). Asked, again in September, whether ‘weapons inspectors should investigate Iraq’s weapon’s capabilities prior to any military action being launched’, almost everyone (89 per cent) interviewed by Newspoll said they should. But, in the same poll, the majority (56 per cent) agreed that Iraq’s offer of ‘unconditional and immediate access for United Nation’s weapon’s inspectors’ was not ‘genuine’ (Vass, 2002); and following the report of the chief United Nations weapons inspector, Hans Blix, three-quarters of those
interviewed, agreed that Saddam Hussein was ‘hiding weapons of mass
destruction’, with two-thirds of respondents (65 per cent) going on to agree
that Saddam Hussein and Iraq were ‘currently a threat to global
security’ (Shanahan, 2003a). Shortly after this, Howard is said to have
remarked, privately, that if the question about going to war was: ‘Would
you support a military strike against Iraq if it refuses to surrender its
weapons of mass destruction?, you would get an entirely different result to
the present poll figures’ (Milne, 2003b), though what poll figures he had in
mind he did not say.

In September, the majority agreed that the Prime Minister ‘must detail in
advance to the Australian people the case and evidence to warrant
Australia’s involvement in any military action against Iraq’ (85 per cent) -
something the Prime Minister tried to do, not only in set pieces but also in
endless radio appearances and media interviews. A fortnight after the Bali
bombings, of October 12, almost twice as many respondents in a Hawker
Britton-UMR poll said that the bombings made them more likely (24 per
cent) rather than less likely (14 per cent) to ‘approve of Australian military
participation in an attack on Iraq’ – a line of argument to which, ten days
before the war, Howard also appealed (Starick and English, 2003). And
surveys by Newspoll in September (Vass, 2002), by ACNielsen in January
(Allard, 2003a), and by Hawker Britton in September, October and March,
reported that for around two-thirds (62 per cent to 70 per cent) of those
interviewed Australia’s involvement in an attack on Iraq would increase the
risk of a terrorist attack in Australia – a worry the Prime Minister sought to
put to rest, most notably in his March 20 ‘Address to the Nation’ (Howard,
2003).

By late January, if not earlier, nearly half (45 per cent) of those interviewed
by Morgan (2003a) thought it ‘very likely’ that ‘military action’ would be
‘launched against Iraq in the next few months’; and almost all of those who
did not think war ‘very likely’ thought it ‘quite likely’. Not that there was
any sign that voters, on balance, wanted war. So, while agreeing that
military action was likely, the Prime Minister, faced by a group of ‘Liberals
against the war’, said that he, too, was a ‘Liberal against war’ (Tingle and
Hepworth, 2003). He stressed that the Government had made no decision to
commit troops to war, and he insisted that if Australia did go to war, it was
Saddam Hussein that would have to be held responsible not the Australian
Government or the Americans (Kitney, 2003b).
However, if the Prime Minister and the public shared some views, they remained at odds on others. In ACNielsen’s (2002) September poll, the majority (54 per cent) of those interviewed nominated a ‘potential war on terrorism against Iraq’ as their greatest concern over the next three years. Asked, late in October, after Bali, whether ‘Australian military forces’ should be ‘used to deal with security issues in Australia and our region rather than participate in the invasion of Iraq’, very few (9 per cent) of those interviewed by Hawker Britton-UMR expressed a preference for participating in a war against Iraq. And at the end of January, following the government’s pre-deployment of ‘some troops to the Gulf region in preparation for a possible war against Iraq’, the majority (60 per cent) of those interviewed by Newspoll said they were opposed to ‘the sending of Australian troops at this stage’; nearly half (46 per cent) were ‘strongly’ opposed.

Mid-February saw a massive mobilisation against the war, and not just in Australia. In the wake of the marches, as many as two-thirds (65 per cent) of those interviewed by Newspoll agreed that ‘anti-war demonstrations should be taken into account by governments around the world when deciding what action to take against Iraq’ (Shanahan, 2003b). Speaking for the Australian Government, Howard tried to present himself as someone who had ‘a great respect for public opinion, I listen to it. I know there are people with reservations about this matter. I’ve thought about all that’ (Rintoul and Kaszubska, 2003). Instinctively, he would have had his doubts about who the demonstrators represented; as Les Murray, the poet once chosen by Howard to draft a preamble to the Constitution, had noted years earlier: a characteristic of ‘majority Australia’ was its ‘almost instinctive rejection of the rallies’ (1997: 144). So, while undoubtedly prepared to take the demonstrators ‘into account’, Howard was hardly ready to capitulate. Willing to acknowledged that ‘a certain percentage of people would feel very strongly opposed to my stance’, and demonstrate, he was keen to point out that ‘there would be many others who would either support it or be very much in the middle’ (Priest, 2003).

A war sanctioned by the United Nations, most respondents agreed, was something they would support. The Prime Minister not only accepted this, he tried to leverage it. He told the American President ‘there was a strong feeling within the Australian community that the UN process should be given a fair go’ (Lewis, et al., 2003); he made it clear that his own preference, ‘overwhelmingly’, was ‘for the matter to go through the
Security Council’ (Tingle, 2003a); and he helped steer President Bush back to the UN (Oakes, 2003; Shanahan, 2003f). What if there was no UN support? Before the war, respondents rejected any idea of defying the UN, more than half rejecting the idea ‘strongly’. But no serious observer should have harboured any doubt that Australia was committed to the ‘coalition of the willing’ whether it received the Security Council’s blessing or not.

How resolute, or consistent, was polled opinion? Not as consistent, it seems, as the Government (Shanahan, 2003c). Interviewed by Newspoll in September, most respondents agreed that ‘[i]f neither the United States or [sic] the United Nations were able to present firm evidence that Iraq has a nuclear weapon capability’ they would be ‘against a military campaign being launched’; but in October, in response to a question posed by Hawker Britton-UMR, most respondents said that if ‘the UN Security Council supports military action against Iraq’ they would approve ‘Australian armed forces participating in this action’. In the September Newspoll, the majority agreed that if neither the United States nor the United Nations were able to present evidence that Iraq had a nuclear capability they would be against a military campaign; but in the same poll the majority agreed that ‘[i]f John Howard did provide evidence which supported a military campaign being taken against Iraq’ they would favour ‘Australian troops participating in a military campaign’. Even in late January, when the majority of respondents were still against war without a UN sanction, most of those interviewed by Morgan agreed that ‘[i]f military action does go ahead against Iraq’, Australia should ‘support this action.’

Some of these majorities may have been generated by the invalid measurement of consistent opinion rather than by the valid measurement of confused opinions. For example, had the line of questioning given them the chance, respondents in the September Newspoll may well have agreed that there were other bases on which they would have supported a war on Iraq, the failure of the US or the UN to ‘present firm evidence that Iraq has a nuclear weapon capability’ notwithstanding; certainly the majority agreed that ‘[i]f Iraq changed its decision to allow unconditional access to United Nations inspectors’, they would support ‘military intervention by the United Nations’. Again, having agreed that the Prime Minister should argue his case for ‘Australia’s involvement in any military action against Iraq’, it would have been churlish for respondents to turn around and say that even though he had made the case Australia should not go to war. (Whether the public eventually thought the Prime Minister had provided the evidence, the
polls never asked). And in Morgan’s January poll, where majorities affirmed both that they would favour military action ‘only if sanctioned by the United Nations’ and that Australia should support military action if ‘military action goes ahead’, respondents may have assumed that if military action did go ahead this would only happen after the United Nations had agreed to it; certainly within both the Government and the Opposition, it was widely believed that a UN decision in favour of war was only a matter of time (Allard, 2003b; Milne, 2003a).

'Public Opinion and the Democratic Deficit: Australia and the War Against Iraq' continues in **part II...**

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1. In addition to the national polls, the metropolitan press commissioned a few state-based polls: from the Taverner Research Company (New South Wales), for the Fairfax-owned *Sun-Herald* in Sydney; from McNair Research (Victoria), for News’ *Herald-Sun* in Melbourne; and from Patterson. Market Research (Western Australia), for the independently owned *West Australian* in Perth. However, they add little to our store of knowledge and I have ignored these in the discussion that follows.

2. Morgan polls are also available on-line at www.roymorgan.com.au

3. In August, September, October and January, Newspoll surveys were conducted for SBS; see, www.newspoll.com.au

4. For results from the Hawker Britton-UMR poll, here and elsewhere, I am indebted to Hawker Britton’s Bevan Lisle. Some of the results are posted on www.hawkerbritton.com.au

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Public Opinion and the Democratic Deficit: Australia and the War Against Iraq

by Murray Goot

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II

Shortly before the war, Newspoll attempted to pin down what the phrase ‘UN support’ might mean. It asked respondents what their view would be ‘[i]f the UN supported military action but a UN member vetoed action’ (Shanahan, 2003c) and found almost as many respondents (42 per cent) said Australian troops should go to war, even if one nation did exercise a veto (Tony Blair’s position), as said they should not (50 per cent). This contrasted sharply with the response to its regular question about support for ‘Australia’s involvement in military action if the United Nations had not given approval for any action’ – a question that constantly showed the majority not only ‘opposed’ but ‘strongly opposed’. What was problematic was not the new question but the old; specifically, the failure of the regular question to ascertain what respondents understood by the idea of the UN not giving its approval.

With the war underway, only one poll returned to the question of the UN. At the end of March, ACNielsen presented respondents with an updated version of the three-options it had tested in mid-January. This time the results were almost exactly the reverse of the earlier findings. Instead of 62 per cent saying that ‘Australia should be involved in a war against Iraq only as part of a United Nations approved force’, only 27 per cent agreed that ‘Australia should not be involved in the war against Iraq because it has not been approved by the United Nations’. And instead of finding just 6 per cent prepared to agree that ‘Australia should be involved in a war against Iraq even though the United Nations does not approve the war’, 44 per cent now endorsed the view that ‘Australia should be involved in the war in Iraq even though the United Nations has not approved of
the war’ (Dodson, 2003; Riley, 2003).

Had the war really transformed opinion? According to ACNielsen, it had; and the change ‘reflected a view of reality’ – that Australian troops had now become ‘involved’ and the ‘UN was out of the picture’ (Dodson, 2003). But results from two other polling organisations suggest that while support for Australia’s participation increased, the war had not turned opinion upside down. By the end of March, support for ‘Australian troops being involved in military action against Iraq’ had increased by just six percentage points, according to Newspoll. At the same time, when Morgan asked about ‘Australians being part of the American military force’ being ‘used to depose Saddam Hussein’, the proportion in favour of such a force was only slightly higher than it had been in December.

The only poll that supports the transformation in sentiment argued by ACNielsen is the Hawker Britton-UMR poll. At the end of March, Hawker Britton-UMR reported that half (51 per cent) of its respondents supported Australian participation in ‘a United States led attack on Iraq’; at the beginning of March the corresponding figure had been just a third (32 per cent). But Bevan Lisle, who manages the poll, prefers to compare his firm’s last poll not with the poll conducted earlier in March but with the poll conducted by Morgan in January. In the Morgan poll, 53 per cent of respondents said Australia should support war ‘if military action goes ahead’; in the Hawker Britton-UMR poll, 51 per cent of respondents supported Australian participation when the war did go ahead. In the ACNielsen poll, only 44 per cent supported the war. These figures, he argues, suggest not that support increased after war broke out but that it decreased (Lisle, pers. com.).

In January, the ACNielsen question was designed to tap an absolute: no UN support for war, then public support for no war. But respondents do not appear to have stuck to the script. What the question elicited from most of the ‘no UN, no war’ group, the March poll suggests, was a statement of preference for a war mandated by the UN, not a stand against a war that the UN might not mandate. When the UN said ‘no’, but America, Britain and Australia said ‘yes’, this preference was simply made manifest.

Support for this line of interpretation is not far to seek. The first and most obvious support comes from the Morgan poll, taken in January, which reported that if military action were to go ahead, the majority of respondents thought Australian should support it. Soon after war broke out, another Morgan poll asked respondents whether, taking ‘everything into account…the United Nations should have supported military action against Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein or not.’ Nearly two-thirds (61 per cent) of respondents said that the UN should have supported military action. Among those who felt that Australia should not go to
Evidence is also available from polling in the United States. There, in January and again in February, more than half of those interviewed (54 per cent and 57 per cent, respectively) agreed that the US should ‘first get a United Nations resolution to use force before taking military action against Iraq’; hardly surprising, perhaps, since polled opinion in the Clinton years showed widespread support for American force being used through the UN rather than unilaterally (Kull and Destler, 1999: 66-7, 77-80). Nonetheless, when asked what the United States should do if ‘the US and most of its allies back using force against Iraq, but the UN resolution is vetoed by one or two countries who oppose it’, those in favour of getting a UN resolution were split down the middle with roughly half (25 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively) agreeing that United States should ‘use force if it feels it is the right thing to do’ (Pew, 2003: 7,19). In the ACNielsen poll, too, roughly half of those who had looked to the UN before the war appear to have supported the United States and its allies once the fighting began.

The only valid comparison between the question ACNielsen asked in January and the question it asked in March may be the contrast to be drawn between the responses to the third option, the one designed to flush out opposition to a war whatever the position of the UN. In the January poll, 30 per cent said that ‘Australia should not be involved in a war against Iraq’; in the March poll, no more than 21 per cent said that ‘Australia should not be involved in a war against Iraq at all’. This represents a shift, certainly; but hardly a turnaround.

Other measures also suggest that opinion shifted towards the Government’s position, once the war was underway: the Hawker Britton-UMR series on ‘Australian armed forces participating in a United States led attack’; the Newspoll series on ‘Australian troops being involved in military action’; and, to a lesser extent, Morgan’s series on ‘Australians being part of the American military force.’

What this shift signified is a question on which the polls shed no light. Respondents may have come to support the war because of what many thought was the one-sidedness of the media’s coverage: in a poll taken at the end of March, Hawker Britton-UMR reported that 45 per cent thought ‘the media coverage’ had been ‘biased towards the United States and its allies’; only 5 per cent thought it ‘biased towards Iraq’. More likely, respondents shifted because of the ‘propaganda of the deed’. How else to explain Newspoll’s finding that nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of those interviewed towards the end of the war thought ‘success in Iraq’ would be ‘good’ rather than bad ‘for future world security and stability’ (Lewis, 2003b); or the rise from a quarter (24 per cent) to a third (33 per
cent), ten days into the fighting, in the proportion of those interviewed by Hawker Britton-UMR who thought that Australia’s participation in a US attack would make ‘no difference’ to ‘the risk of a terrorist attack on Australia’? As Paul Kelly prophesied: ‘In war success creates its own legitimacy…pre-war sentiment won’t matter a fig’ (2003a). Or to quote Howard’s more prosaic forecast, a lot would depend ‘on how things unfold’ (DT, 2003).

It is conceivable that the polls shifted not because of any change of heart among respondents about the war itself but ‘purely’, as Guy Rundle, the co-editor of Arena Magazine put it, because of ‘communal loyalty to fellow Australians in a dangerous situation’ (2003). This interpretation was widely circulated, especially in Labor ranks, partly as a way of saving the hypothesis that war was something the public would continue to oppose. Though the idea was never pursued through the polls, it is difficult to reconcile with other data: poll data generated after the first Iraq war (Goot, 1992: 160-1); a focus group, reported by Hugh Mackay, in which a sense of solidarity with the Australian troops seems not to have surfaced as a force shaping support for the war (2003); and the fall in anti-war sentiment in a non-combatant state like France (Reuters, 2003).

What Newspoll, in particular, did not fail to pursue during the war was the rise in support for the Prime Minister, the fall in support for the Leader of the Opposition, and the widening difference between support for the Coalition parties and support for Labor. Between March 14-16 and April 11-13, according to Newspoll, the proportion of respondents ‘satisfied with the way John Howard [was] doing his job as Prime Minister rose from 48 per cent (the point to which it had initially slipped mid-February, the weekend of the anti-war marches) to 58 per cent; the proportion ‘dissatisfied with the way Simon Crean [was] doing his job as Leader of the Opposition’ increased from 52 per cent (even mid-February it had been 53 per cent) to 57 per cent; and the gap between support for the Coalition and the support for Labor grew from five percentage points (six percentage points, mid-February) to thirteen percentage points. Support for Howard and the Coalition had risen, notwithstanding the war being fought outside the framework of the UN. Support for Crean and Labor had fallen, notwithstanding Crean’s success in placing himself ‘lockstep with a significant majority of Australians’ (Hawker, 2003) - or, as Howard preferred to put it, notwithstanding that the Leader of the Opposition was being driven by opinion polls (Lewis, 2003c). And support for the Greens had remained more or less steady (Lewis, 2003d), notwithstanding the size of the demonstrations and the position of the Greens as an unambiguously anti-war party.

The Morgan poll, which reports voting intention but not leaders’ support, tells a rather different story. Between March 15-16 and March 22-23, according to Morgan’s reading, the Coalition built a lead of 9.5 percentage points over Labor,
having started with no lead at all. But between March 22-23 and April 5-6, there was an even bigger movement the other way: by the end of the first two weeks of war Labor was ahead of the Coalition by two percentage points. Thereafter, there was a swing back: from April 5-6 to April 12-13 and from April 12-13 to April 19/20, the Coalition led by four percentage points and then by 9.5 percentage points. By war’s end, in other words, the Coalition was no further ahead of Labor than it had been at the start. As with Newspoll, the same was said to be true of the Greens (Morgan, 2003e).

In trying to assess whether the public came to the ‘public judgment’ of which Yankelovich speaks, the polls provide some assurance, though of a limited kind. A Morgan poll, taken in December, on what respondents thought were the three main issues the government should be ‘doing something about’ suggests that a fair number of people had engaged in the issue; 22 per cent of respondents nominated things to do with ‘national security’ or ‘terrorism’, three times as many as mentioned such issues after September 2001 (Morgan, 2002b). At the beginning of February, Newspoll ventured further. It reported that for more nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) of those interviewed ‘the issue of Australian troops being involved in a war against Iraq’ would be either ‘very important’ (35 per cent) or ‘fairly important’ (36 per cent) to the way they voted at a federal election (Shanahan, 2003a) – though, whatever the issue, questions in this form typically elicit this sort of response. The polls also suggest that respondents knew something of the choices that confronted the country. And they provide evidence of widespread concern about one of the possible consequences of going to war – the increased threat of terrorism.

However, the polls do not tell us much about whether respondents had ‘considered the issue from all sides’; whether, for example, those in favour of war had considered other ways of containing Saddam, or whether those against the war had reckoned with the life-chances of those condemned to remain under Saddam. Nor do the polls tell us whether respondents accepted the ‘full consequences’ of the choices they were being asked to make - in relation to Australia’s relations with the United States or with various countries in the region; in relation to the budget and other opportunity costs; or in relation to lives saved or lost. This was true, it should be stressed, of those who were happy for Australia to be part of ‘the coalition of the willing’, of those prepared to sanction war only if it were to be conducted under the UN’s auspices, and of those who insisted that what the war really represented was ‘the killing by the willing’.

**Conclusion**

After the publication of one of the last of the pre-war polls, Alan Ramsey, a Canberra columnist for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, declared that the Prime
Minister had ‘grievously misjudged Australian sentiment’. To support his claim he quoted at length from Rod Cameron of Australian Nationwide Opinion Polls, about ‘a growing and entrenched opposition to the Iraq war’. Said Cameron: ‘It would be a very unpopular war – very unpopular and John Howard would not win the issue, even if it were a short and a sharp encounter’. Cameron, who had polled for Labor during much of the 1970s and 1980s, insisted that ‘[t]he numbers are now and will remain opposed to a war’. And, he added: ‘I think that’s true with or without the UN backing’ (Ramsey, 2003).

After the publication of the first Newspoll of the war, the Australian’s editor-at-large, Paul Kelly, declared that the Government’s decision to go to war ‘had transformed Australian sentiment’. Before the war, Newspoll had reported that opinion was against the war. Now, with support and opposition to the war ‘virtually even’, the line that Howard had ‘defied the democratic will’ was ‘lost’ (2003c).

As claims about the state of the polls before the war, attempts to second-guess their shape after the war, or descriptions of their movements following the commencement of the war, the conclusions drawn by Cameron and Kelly were by turns wrong, foolish, and extravagant. A careful reading of the polls conducted before the war suggests three important conclusions. First, that many of the questions were misleading, none more so than that purported to show how respondents would feel if the UN were to oppose the war. Second, and leaving aside the questions about the UN, that as war approached the difference between the proportion of supporters of Australia’s involvement in the war and the proportion of opponents was not very great. And third, apart from questions about the UN, strong opposition to the war never registered widely enough to merit so forceful a description as the one used by Kelly - ‘democratic will’. Even if it had, the public’s backing of the war once it started hardly entails its support for war before it started.

As war approached, especially after the anti-war marches, there were calls for a plebiscite on the issue (Tingle, 2003b); indeed, ‘the plebiscite line received blanket coverage on radio and TV and in the papers’ (Price, 2003b). One social theorist, Ghassan Hage, having noted that Howard’s supporters thought it ‘nice to have a politician driven by convictions rather than by polls’, went on to argue that in a democracy ‘politicians still have to convince a majority of the people’ (2003). However, in liberal democracies claims of this kind are at best contestable and at worst untrue. As the Daily Telegraph (18 January) already had argued, to say that the Prime Minister would be ‘acting improperly’ if he committed Australian troops would be ‘to fail to comprehend the basic tenets of democracy’. As leader of the Government, ‘Mr Howard has been elected to speak on behalf of all citizens’ and if he believed it to be in ‘the national interest’ to go
to war, it was his right to go there.

The only way to legitimate Howard’s decision to insert Australian forces ‘in this US venture’, Hage maintained, was ‘through an immediate referendum or some other democratic mechanism.’ (Another academic social scientist, Peter Christoff (2003), pleaded a similar case as a counter to a ‘substantial democratic deficit’). However, the call for an ‘immediate referendum’ made little sense. No referendum can be immediate: from the drafting of a parliamentary bill to the counting of the final result takes months. The delay occasioned by a referendum may have precluded Australia from participating in any war – including a war endorsed by the UN. And even if this were not the case, those who called for a referendum failed to spell out exactly what it was the Government might be authorized to do if the referendum passed, or what it would be unable to do if the referendum failed.

More generally, the call failed to make a persuasive case for having a referendum on Iraq but not on other issues, including those on which the likely outcome might not be what some advocates of a referendum in relation to Iraq would have wanted. Hage was not alone in suggesting that the Government’s decision ‘to send Australians to die’ was a special case. And while the Government was not, as it turned out, sending any Australians to die – and the nature of the deployment minimised the number that might have died – it was certainly putting Australian lives at risk. But were Hage and others right in seeing a decision of this kind as somehow special? Not necessarily. Governments constantly make decisions – about health, roads, welfare, and so on – that make it more likely that some people will die while others will live.

A public opinion poll might be considered a quicker, and cheaper, alternative to a referendum. Certainly George Gallup promoted polls as if they were equivalent to a referendum. But polls and referendums are quite different. In a referendum someone other than the pollster, usually the government, determines the question; there is a relatively long period of public debate; and in the course of the campaign, in which people know their voice will count, opinions can change quite rapidly. Polls on Iraq with differently worded questions often produced different results; in a referendum, where the wording of the questions may be less important than what the protagonists say is at stake, differently worded questions might have produced rather similar results.

What of the ‘other’ democratic mechanism? Over the ‘unpopular GST’, Hage recalled, Howard ‘went to the people and obtained a mandate’. In 1998, Howard did campaign on a Goods and Services Tax. But he won despite the GST not because of it. And while the Coalition won the majority of seats in the House of Representatives it did not do so in the Senate, where representation – as in the
European Parliament – is based not on the equal representation of individuals but on the unequal representation of territories and states. In the event, the Coalition obtained a mandate to form a government rather than a mandate to introduce a GST (Goot, 1999). An election in late 2002 or early 2003, one that would have been held little more than a year after the last election was not necessarily one that voters would have welcomed. And an election outcome, in which war parties held the majority in the House, while anti-war parties held the majority in the Senate, may have produced something that looked less like a democratic solution than a democratic conundrum.

Common to those proposing some democratic mechanism by which Howard could be held more immediately accountable was an assumption that the Prime Minister was not following public opinion but defying it, something he had done - though critics of the Prime Minister as a poll-follower rarely acknowledged it - over the privatisation of Telstra in 1996, the Goods and Services Tax in 1998, and the Republic in 1999 (Goot, 2000). It is possible that Howard, too, saw himself at odds with the public on Iraq; certainly, he never suggested openly that public opinion was on his side. But, if the conclusion in this paper is valid, the dominant reading of the polls was mistaken. As the Morgan poll, in January, reported respondents were prepared to support a war if war were declared and if - as the context implied - America and its allies were engaged in it.

Howard may have chosen to go to war not because he thought of himself as a delegate of the people, authorised through the polls, but because - in the fashion of deliberative democrat - he wanted to do what the public would have done ‘if it had a more adequate chance to think about the questions at issue’ (Fishkin, 1991: 1). High among the questions at issue was the future of Australia’s relations with the world’s only ‘hyperpower’, the United States – a relationship that involved not only the hope of continued military security but also the prospect of free bi- lateral trade. ‘Any country that steps up to the plate now in support of the administration’, a former top Pentagon official remarked, prior to the war, ‘will get a lot of credit and will be remembered for a long time’ (Hartcher, 2003; for Howard’s views along these lines, see Kelly, 2003d).

Ultimately, however, the idea that the Prime Minister pursued his ends without regard to public opinion in the here and now makes little political sense; as one journalist has observed, Howard ‘prides himself on having the best-tuned political antennae in the business’ (Penberthy, 2003). Thanks to Mark Textor, the Party’s mainstay in matters of market research, Howard would have been furnished with critical readings of the poll stories carried by the press, plied with alternative data, and offered independent strategic advice. Whether, as a consequence, the Prime Minister set much store by the published polls is a moot point.
Textor is likely to have concentrated his efforts around focus groups – small numbers of carefully selected respondents encouraged to speak freely about the sorts of things the Party wanted to hear about - the better, he might have argued, for getting a handle on what the Party’s key constituencies were saying, how they were saying it, and the nature of their reasoning.

Insofar as his regular polling in marginal seats touched on the war, Textor is certain to have employed different techniques from those used in generating the published polls. Howard, who talked of voters being not only opposed to war or in favour of it, but of being somewhere in the middle, is said to have complained about opinion polls being ‘narrow in the “black-white, war-peace” cast of their questions’ (Milne, 2003b). Remarks of this kind may provide a clue to Textor’s own approach. More importantly, he is likely to have asked different sorts of questions. Whereas the published polls concentrated on questions of policy, Textor is likely to have focused on ‘diagnostics’. Instead of asking respondents to come up with remedies (should Australia go to war to change the regime in Iraq?) he would have been more interested in questions that showed whether the Coalition rated more highly than Labor as a party that was trustworthy, likely to manage national security well, and so on – the sort of questions that have formed part of the party’s program of continuous polling since Howard came to office in 1996.

Such an approach is related not to direct democracy, of course, or to deliberative democracy but to the approach to democracy championed by the Master of Balliol, A.D. Lindsay. The point about democracy, argued Lord Lindsay, in the same year as Schumpeter’s book was published, is that if the shoes pinches voters are the only ones ‘who can tell where they pinch’. Voters cannot be expected to have more than ‘the vaguest ideas’ of what reform will stop the pinching; that is the job of legislators and administrators; and they can be held to account at the next election (1943: 269-70). In the meantime, he might have added, there is no reason why voters shouldn’t be able to express their confidence in which of the shoemakers they want to have fix which shoe.

What advice the Prime Minister received from Textor we do not know. But it is likely to have had a bearing on at least three things. First, and most importantly, the Prime Minister's freedom of manoeuvre. The focus groups would have afforded considerable insight into the extent to which respondents were prepared, even happy, to defer to the Prime Minister’s sense of the national interest, access to better information, and wider experience; the polls would have revealed whether the style of government respondents were seeking was one that valorised strength and decisiveness at the top or one that privileged a sense of the government’s listening to and being in touch with voters at the bottom. Second,
the Prime Minister would have received strategic advice in relation to the Opposition. This may have encouraged the Prime Minister to weaken Labor’s electoral position by adopting, what President Clinton’s pollster called, the strategy of ‘triangulation’ (Morris, 2002, 89ff); here, the act of embracing not only his own preferred means (the US) of disarming Iraq but also Labor’s preferred means (the UN). And third, the Prime Minister is certain to have been offered a critical reading of the polls published in the press. In particular, Textor is sure to have included advice sharply at odds with that offered by Newspoll’s Sol Lebovic, who insisted, a month before the war, that ‘Opinion towards Australian involvement depends entirely on whether there is UN backing or not’ (Price, 2003a).

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