

Remarks at the poll launch by Allan Gyngell
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The Lowy Institute Poll 2005

Australians Speak: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

We're releasing today the first of what we intend to be a regular series of Lowy Institute polls on the way Australians look at the world. We've called it "Australians speak: 2005". This is the most comprehensive such survey undertaken in this country. Our objective was not so much to poll Australians' attitudes on current issues – although we want to do some of that – but to ask questions that will let us understand some of the deeper issues of how Australians think about the world and our place in it and how they want us to act in it. Assertions are frequently made by politicians and commentators, journalists and analysts, about how ordinary Australians think – we wanted to find out how accurate these assertions are.

Our model has been the sort of work done over decades in the United States by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and by the Pew Research Center. The advantage of this work is that it enables you to track changing attitudes over time. We can begin to identify the values Australians hold - these will be deep, culturally imbued and resistant to change - and compare these with opinions that will shift with changing events in the world. Other researchers such as the Australian Election Study and the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes have done important work in areas of public opinion but we hope that the Lowy Institute polls will provide a new level of detail across all the dimensions of international policy.

Any poll will, of course, be shaped by the sort of questions you choose to ask and by the particular wording you use to ask them. Polling has its obvious limitations, and we have already learned lessons about how we can do it better next time. But I must emphasise that there was no outcome we were hoping to generate from our survey and no particular result we wanted to find beyond the most accurate possible reading of how Australians think, at this point in 2005, about some central foreign and security policy issues.

Our polling organisation, UMR, took a random sample of 1000 Australians and asked them by telephone a series of 26 questions about Australia in the world. The questions and the responses are available on the Lowy Institute website and are summarised in the report by Ivan Cook who is a research associate at the Institute. The margin of error on the main sample is 3.1 per cent.

Before I get onto the poll results I need to thank a number of people. First John Utting and Bruce Dier from UMR. Their expert technical skills and professional helpfulness undoubtedly made this a richer and more revealing survey than it might otherwise have been. It was a great pleasure to work with them.

We also need to thank our advisory committee – Professor William Tow originally from Griffith but now from the ANU, Professor Andrew Macintyre from ANU and Mr Chemi Shalev who has been involved in public opinion polling for a long time. Above all we need to thank Graeme Lawless, whose generous commitment of time and mind to this project, was invaluable. He has made a very significant contribution to the Lowy Institute poll.

I also want particularly to thank Ivan Cook. Ivan was the person above all others who brought this survey from an idea to reality.

Now to the poll.

I have spent most of my adult life working on aspects of Australian foreign policy and I have to say that the results of the survey have jolted some of my assumptions (and challenged some of the things I've written) about what Australians think.

The picture is far more complicated than most of the pundits and politicians assert. The national view is not easily characterised in the terms in which most of the public debate takes place. On the one hand, Australians express a very deep commitment to international law, to the United Nations, and to the international environment – views often attributed to a latte-loving elite. But, on the other, they have no trouble at all endorsing the use of Australian military forces under a wide range of different scenarios and they feel pretty damn good about the country. If you want to use the drinking metaphor beloved of some commentators, it turns out they are quite happy sipping chardonnay and then skolling down a VB chaser.

Australians also seem to know what they think. The 'unsure' figures throughout the poll were very low – under three per cent for the survey as a whole. Australians clearly don't regard foreign policy as something too difficult or specialist for them to have a view about.

We first asked questions designed to identify how optimistic Australians were about their future – both in terms of economic prospects and international security.

The answer is that when they think about the outside world Australians feel very confident.

Economically, 67 per cent of respondents were optimistic or very optimistic about the country's economic performance in the world over the next five years compared with just 10 per cent expressing various degrees of pessimism. We are slightly less certain about our international security, but even here 50 per cent of respondents expressed optimism

for the next five years compared with just 19 per cent expressing various degrees of pessimism.

Australians are proud of the country and its role in the world but they have a pretty realistic approach to where we fit in the world. They don't harbour romantic illusions. The vast majority (82 per cent) believe Australia is a good international citizen and important in Asia and that we are well placed to success in a competitive world. And only 37 per cent agree with the idea that we are 'unimportant in global politics'.

Are we independent minded, however? We are surprisingly split about that – 49 per cent agree, 48 per cent disagree - and 65 per cent see us as “a follower not a leader”

We wanted to see how Australians placed themselves in the community of nations, so we asked whether interviewees had positive or negative feelings about a wide range of different countries and organisations. This is a blunt question, with no room for nuance, but it delivers a general sense of attitudes to other countries.

The answers showed that Australians felt overwhelmingly positive about **New Zealand** – 94 per cent expressed positive feelings. This might come as a shock to New Zealanders. The **United Kingdom** was nearly as high. So, too, in reassuring evidence of how attitudes change over time, was **Japan**, with 84 per cent expressing positive feelings. The same thing was seen in the high rating **China** achieved, at 69 per cent positive feelings, ahead of **France** and the **United Nations**. **Indonesia**, presumably for reasons of history – lingering memories of confrontation and more recently the East Timor dispute - is on 52 per cent.

Most interesting in this group is the low rating of positive feelings for the **United States** – just 58 per cent. A key question which future polls will answer is whether that is a response to the particular US administration at the moment or whether it reflects a deeper cultural or political scepticism. Is this something that will grow over time or diminish?

It certainly reflects a separate perception we found that Australia takes ‘too much notice of the views of the United States in our foreign policies’ 68 per cent agreed with that statement compared with just 14 per cent who responded in the same way about the United Nations. 29 per cent thought we took the right amount of notice and just 2 per cent, too little notice.

Even if you take the 58 per cent of Australians who have a positive attitude towards the United States, half of that group still think Australia pays too much attention to the views of the United States.

The **United Nations** result probably reflects a realistic understanding of the limits of UN power but it also suggests that it would be hard to generate a scare campaign here about the power of multilateral institutions.

We asked a series of questions designed to try to answer the question: **how idealistic are Australians?** Do they want to use our power in the world to do good things? Or do they think we should be guided by self-interest? The result is mixed.

We asked:

Thinking about what Australian foreign policy should be trying to achieve I am going to read a list of goals and ask you to tell me how important each one is for Australia

Most of the goals that emerged at the top of the list fall into the realist, self-interested category – strengthening the economy, protecting the jobs of workers, countering terrorism and preventing nuclear proliferation. The more idealistic aims – promoting human rights, strengthening the United Nations, promoting democracy – rated lower.

But leading them all was improving the global environment at 75 per cent support. That suggests to me that Australians see the environment less in idealistic terms than as something that will affect them quite directly.

In a similar vein we wanted to know whether Australians thought that **international law** was important. We asked the question

*Thinking about how Australia deals with international problem , which of the following approaches do you favour more?
'Australia should rely on international law even though decisions may go against us
OR
Australia should do whatever benefits us the most in any given situation regardless of what international law says?'*

By 64 per cent to 33 per cent we said we opted for international law. But would that hold in more specific cases? What if we had given a specific example here? The answer is less certain I think.

In a similar vein, we also wanted to know, especially after the great response to the tsunami disaster, what Australians thought about **aid**. Why did Australian think we should give aid to others? The answer is another mixture of idealism and self-interest, with idealism more pronounced. Most respondents thought it was because helping to raise living standards made the world safer, or because we had an obligation to share our wealth with people who have less than we do. Less favoured were the minimalist view that we should only give aid in response to emergencies, or the idea that aid increased our influence with our neighbours

We turned next to the **international security situation**.

Beginning with the current situation, we asked ‘Thinking about world events, how safe to you feel?’ 91 per cent said they felt safe or very safe. So whether or not we are alert, we are certainly not alarmed.

We asked about a series of potential threats from the outside world and asked people how worried they were about them. The surprises here, I think, are the high response on global warming – the second most worrying threat and ranking ahead of international terrorism. And most startling of all was the precise equivalence of Islamic fundamentalism and US foreign policy as a source of concern. 57 per cent of respondents said that they were very worried or fairly worried about these as potential threats.

It is also worth noting that China’s growing power rated lowest of all on the list of potential threats – with the largest number of people not worried at all about it and the fewest saying they were very worried.

So what do these ambivalent attitudes towards the United States and its foreign policies mean? It is not that we do not value the security alliance: 72 per cent think the alliance is either very important or fairly important for Australia’s security and just 7 per cent rate it not at all important. Even of those respondents who expressed negative feelings about the United States the majority rate the alliance as very important or fairly important to our security.

So what happens if you press the issue further by reference to a specific contingency – one that has been widely discussed – a conflict in the **Strait of Taiwan**? We asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement:

Australia should act in accordance with our security alliance with the United States even if it means following them to war with China over the independence of Taiwan.

It’s a complex question and a relatively high 7 per cent of respondents were unsure of their response, but 72 per cent disagreed with the statement and only 21 per cent were in favour. Even of those who think our alliance with the United States is “very important” fully 57 per cent said they opposed joining the United States in the Taiwan Strait.

The **Iraq War** is another possible test of attitudes towards the alliance. Of those respondents who said they had originally supported the Australian commitment to Iraq, only 9 per cent said they did so “because of our alliance with the United States”.

So what does this say about the attitude of Australians to the use of force? It’s clearly not something that we are chary about in principle. We asked about a series of contingencies in the world and whether Australia should have the right to use armed force outside Australia in a number of ways. Of the eight contingencies we proposed, only one – to establish democracy in undemocratic countries – failed to get majority support. The most popular scenario was ‘in support of United Nations or regionally endorsed peace keeping missions’. Very high responses also apply in cases of prevention of genocide and gross

abuses of human rights and to prevent internal collapse in a failing country in our neighbourhood.

This underlines, I think, the reasons for the widespread support for Australia's East Timor and Solomon Islands commitments.

Pre-emption has been the subject of fierce debate since September 11 and the Iraq War and the Prime Minister was criticised for comments he made about the subject.

The Australian people don't have many qualms about that. 66 per cent agreed with the statement 'If we believed that terrorists based in another country were going to launch an attack on Australia and if the other country could not or would not take action to stop them, should we have the right to strike directly at the terrorists?' Perhaps more surprising here was the 29 per cent who disagreed. Was this because the Iraq War has given pre-emption a bad name?

We asked a series of questions about the Iraq War designed in part to see whether people's views on the war had changed.

The answer was that, as other polls have found, Australians remain divided on this question. Of our respondents, 43 per cent remembered supporting the Iraq War and 54 per cent remembered opposing it. When we asked people to identify the main reason for their support, the largest number - 31 per cent - said it was to remove Saddam Hussein. An almost equal number - 29 per cent - thought it was about fighting terrorism. Only 17 per cent - now at least - say they were primarily swayed by arguments about WMD and just 9 per cent said they supported the war for alliance reasons.

The subject still divides Australians more than almost any other we asked about. We asked whether Australia should continue to be involved in Iraq. 46 per cent said we should and 51 per cent were opposed. There is a high degree of continuity in this. In other words, the experience of the war on the ground has not greatly altered the views people have long held about the commitment, although it has moved more people to favour it than to oppose it.

Turning to **international trade**, people found the questions harder to grapple with, probably unsurprisingly. We found the highest number of unsure figures in this area.

The most interesting outcome here was in questions about the Free Trade Agreement with the United States and China. Respondents were very evenly balanced on the virtues of the FTA with the United States - 34 per cent thinking it will be a good thing, 34 per cent that it will make no difference or are unsure and 32 per cent thinking it will be bad for Australia. A similar question about a potential FTA with China received a much higher level of support - 51 per cent think it would be good for Australia and just 20 per cent that it would be bad.

It will be interesting to see how these figures stand up to a more robust public debate on the China FTA.

Let's end with another mark of confidence. We asked Australians what they thought about globalisation – whatever your views on the subject, one of the defining characteristics of our age. Most Australians think that globalisation has had a positive effect on their standard of living, on the country's economy and even, surprisingly, perhaps, on our culture. They are less sure about job security and clearly believe globalisation has had a bad effect on the environment – 57 per cent.

What lessons do we draw from this survey result? We hope that many different people will use the data to do their own analysis and to draw their own conclusions about what it means and what Australia should be doing.

I don't want to pre-empt that discussion in any way. But let me close with just two points about countries important to Australia.

One immediate lesson is that supporters of the Australia-US relationship have a much bigger job to do in bringing the community along with them. The poll results reinforce an argument that some people have been making for more than a decade now, that as the memory of the second world war fades (as it certainly has done with Japan), the constituency for the relationship need to be rebuilt. That rebuilding certainly involves, among other things, increasing the level of understanding and analysis of the United States in Australia.

The second point is more encouraging. It is clear that Australians have a highly differentiated view of Asia. It is not seen simply as a source of threat. This is mostly good news but there is still an obvious odd man out here - Indonesia. Why is that? Again there are opportunities to be taken here. The enormous outpouring of support for tsunami victims in Indonesia gave the Australian community an interest in Indonesia it has had only intermittently in the past. And the visit to Australia this week of President Yudhoyono, and his and the Prime Minister's clear commitment to building and broadening the relationship, offer up new opportunities to build understanding. This poll shows that the need is there; polls in future years will show whether we succeed.

I have said quite often that one of the useful tasks the Lowy Institute can perform is to complicate the debate in Australia about international policy, to get rid of simplistic and caricatured views and to present the debate about how Australia should be acting in the world in all its full and challenging complexity.

We also believe that one of the keys to the success of Australia's national ambitions in the world lies in the engaged attention of an informed Australian public.

We hope that this poll, and its successors over time, will help us serve those two aims.

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