

**HOWARD'S WAY? PUBLIC OPINION AS AN INFLUENCE ON AUSTRALIA'S
ENGAGEMENT WITH ASIA**

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The question of Australia's engagement with the countries of East Asia has long been a central issue in the way Australia relates to the world. This paper assesses this issue during the period of the Howard government from 1996 but from a particular perspective.¹ It gives attention to those aspects of Asian engagement where public opinion appears to have had some influence on government policy, with a view to determining more precisely what that influence amounted to. Has the Howard government simply continued Asian engagement along the broad lines laid down by Australian governments since the 1970s? Have there been particular areas of engagement where public opinion has been important as a consideration for the government? In such cases how has public opinion been dealt with? It is the contention of this paper that while there have been some differences in emphasis as compared with previous governments, in broad terms the strategy for Asian engagement has been remarkably similar at a substantive level as far as the external dimensions are concerned. The differences between the previous Keating Labor government and the Howard government have been at the level of rhetoric and in relation to the domestic political dimension of Asian engagement. The Howard government has eschewed the 'big picture' approach espoused by Paul Keating in favour of an emphasis on the 'practical' aspects of Asian engagement. Rather than seeing the remaking of Australian identity as a key dimension of Asian engagement, the Howard government has aimed to avoid 'social engineering'. Given this approach there have been at least two areas relating to Asian engagement where the Howard government has had to be sensitive to the role of public opinion. These concern

¹ A good overview of Australia's Asian engagement during the Howard period is Wesley (2007). For more detailed studies of particular aspects, see the relevant chapters in Cotton and Ravenhill (2001, 2007).

Australian relations with Indonesia, an aspect of 'practical' engagement, and the impact of Asian immigration on Australian society.

In assessing the impact of public opinion on the Howard government's approach to Asian engagement, this paper begins by reviewing the literature on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, particularly as developed in the United States. Based on that review a framework is established to provide a basis for analysing the Howard government's approach. Essentially the emphasis is on the views of the prime minister (John Howard) about the role of public opinion in relation to this issue. Much of the literature in this area focuses on the United States, and especially on the role of the President. In Australia under Howard the role of prime minister seems to have become more 'presidential', with strong cabinet (and even backbench) discipline. While the views of Alexander Downer also need to be investigated in future research, Howard's strong leadership justifies the initial focus here on his attitudes towards public opinion and engagement with Asia. The prime minister is also in the public spotlight more often than other policy makers, and is therefore in the best position to manage public opinion. Public opinion has an influence insofar as the key decision makers (in this case Howard) take it into account; this also involves determining how those leaders take public opinion into account. Based on this starting point the paper proceeds to assess the impact of public opinion in relation to the two key areas that have been identified: relations with Indonesia and Asian immigration. In both cases a starting point is the policies adopted by the previous Labor government, particularly during the prime ministership of Paul Keating (1991-96). Then the main phases in the particular policy area are assessed from

the perspective of the linkage between public opinion and government policy. In the case of Indonesia the main areas to consider are the East Timor crisis of 1999, and then the attempt to rebuild relations, particularly during the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono from 2004. Issues such as the Bali bombings of 2002, the tsunami of Boxing Day 2004, the Schapelle Corby case in 2005, the West Papua issue and the security treaty in 2006 are particularly relevant. With the Asian immigration issue the main interest is the way in which the Howard government has maintained levels of Asian immigration while also cultivating a conservative populism that is sceptical if not hostile to such immigration.

Following a review of relevant international literature, this paper proposes that John Howard's approach to the role of public opinion has been based on the 'pragmatist' model, i.e. he believes that it is politically necessary to take account of public opinion but does not necessarily regard public views as paramount if those views are contrary to his own. 'Taking account of public opinion' means ensuring that public opinion is sufficiently supportive to allow the government to survive politically; this could mean mounting a campaign to win public support if the public is initially sceptical of the government's preferred direction, or it might mean modifying the government's position in some respects. 'Taking account' does not mean that the government simply 'follows' public opinion on whatever the particular issue is; Howard's preference has always been to follow the policy that he believes is right for the particular issue, with some effort being put into winning the public over if there are strongly articulated views in the

community that are contrary to his own.² Howard's ability to follow his preferred course has been influenced by the particular political context affecting the issue in question. In relation to Asian engagement during the Howard period there is an interesting comparison between policy towards Indonesia and policy towards Asian immigration. In terms of the impact of context, policy towards Indonesia involved both 'deliberative' and 'crisis' elements. There was a long term policy towards Indonesia supported by both Coalition and Labor governments that gave primacy to Indonesian concerns. 'Crisis' situations arose when there were strong expressions of public opinion directed against Indonesia as a response to particular developments (most notably with East Timor in 1999). A high level of political management was required to avoid the long term approach developed by successive Australian governments being undermined. The Asian immigration issue involved a more 'deliberative' context, with policy developed in a more consistent environment throughout the whole period of the Howard government. This policy suggested some modification of Howard's earlier populist stance, while still conveying a strongly 'Australianist' or 'integrationist' perspective on the issue. While the rhetoric critical of Asian immigration was no longer used, Howard gave the impression that the policy pursued reflected both his own beliefs and his perception of public attitudes on this matter.

² For a discussion of the complexities of the relationship between political leaders and public opinion, with particular reference to the Howard government, see Goot (2005). Goot argues that Howard is definitely not a 'poll follower' (pp. 191-94).

The impact of public opinion on foreign policy: A theoretical framework

In assessing the impact of public opinion on Australia's Asian engagement policies during the Howard period, it is helpful to refer to the international literature on the linkage between public opinion and foreign policy. Reviewing this literature provides the basis for developing a framework that can be applied to the specific issue in the Australian context that we are interested in.

Most of the literature exploring the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy has been focused on the US. Leaving aside the normative question of how much influence the public should have on foreign policy, three key questions have driven the debate: what is the nature of public opinion, does it exert any influence over foreign policy and, if so, under what circumstances?³ In order to construct a framework that can be applied to the issue of Asian engagement under the Howard government, this section will deal briefly with the first two questions before delving into the third, more complex, problem in greater depth.

Early commentators such as Walter Lippmann and Gabriel Almond, who were especially influential in the decades immediately following the Second World War, had a sceptical view of the nature of mass opinion (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955). The so-called 'Almond/Lippmann consensus' was based on the belief that the mass public were not well informed about foreign policy issues and that mass public opinion was subject to rapid, irrational swings. However, this view that the mass public is fickle and emotional

³ Important works include Cohen (1973); Risse-Kappen (1991); Foyle (1999).

has been strongly challenged, with Page and Shapiro (1992: 1) concluding collective public opinion is generally 'real, stable, and sensible'. Ole Holsti (2004: 95-96), in examining surveys of US opinion on attitudes towards the Soviet Union/Russia and China, found that public opinion generally reflected events that occurred in the real world and shifts in opinion were not random or irrational but based on actual events and trends. In other words, while public opinion could most certainly change over time, the public was not 'fickle' when it came to foreign policy (see also Hinckley 1992). Eugene Wittkopf (1990) has also questioned the idea that due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of foreign policy issues public opinion on foreign policy is not coherent. Wittkopf argued that even if people do not know where Nicaragua is in Central America or who the US supports there, they still have a clear idea about whether or not US troops should be sent to intervene. This shows that the public, even when not particularly well informed, holds foreign policy beliefs that are politically relevant (15).

Another key question has been the degree to which public opinion influences policy. Almond (1950: 138-39) claimed that elites influenced policy, but that the wider public – which he divided into the mass public and the attentive public based on their levels of information and attention to public issues – did not exert any significant influence. Lippmann (1955: 20), however, believed that mass opinion did affect foreign policy decisions, although in a manner that 'compelled the governments, which usually knew what would have been wiser, or was necessary, or was more expedient, to be too late with too little, or too long with too much, too pacifist in peace and too bellicose in war, too neutralist or appeasing in negotiation or too intransigent'. Later researchers have

generally focused on mass opinion through broad-based polling rather than looking at elite lobby groups (e.g. Hinckley 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992). This can be related to the growth in both mass communication and in the availability and sophistication of polling technology over the last sixty years, allowing greater communication between policy makers and mass publics, even between election periods, increasing the influence of broader public opinion. The focus in this study will therefore also be on mass opinion rather than the opinions of specific ‘opinion leaders’ or interest groups.

There have also been those who have argued that public opinion really has little, if any, influence over foreign policy. Cohen claims that politicians pay little attention to the views of the public. Instead of, like Lippmann, lamenting the misguided influence of the public on otherwise rational policy, Cohen (1973) argues that politicians attempt to bring public opinion into line with policy and do not often change policies to appease the public, focusing more on manipulating opinion than following it. Others have also claimed that policy directs opinion, rather than vice versa (Ginsberg 1986; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

It is clear that politicians attempt, with varying degrees of success, to shape public opinion, and these studies of manipulation emphasise the need to be wary of assuming that policy makers slavishly follow changes in the public mood. However, there is a fairly broad consensus that public opinion does, at least in certain circumstances, have a constraining influence on foreign policy. In his influential 1961 book *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, V.O. Key Jr developed the concept of ‘opinion dikes’. Key (1961:

552) claimed that rather than having a direct influence on policy, public opinion formed 'a system of dikes which channel public action or which fix a range of discretion within which government may act or within which debate at official levels may proceed.' The climate of opinion sets boundaries that permit certain actions without prescribing particular policies or even assuring that action will be taken at all (424). This was an important theoretical clarification that allowed Key to account for the obvious fact that policy makers do not always follow public opinion and often attempt to influence the public so that it supports their preferred policies, while also acknowledging that public opinion does impose some limitations by determining which policies are politically viable. This conclusion has been supported in recent studies (Foyle 2004; Sobel 2001).

Since the early Almond/Lippmann period, researchers have increasingly focused on the third problem of identifying the circumstances under which public opinion exerts influence over foreign policy. Proceeding from the assumption that public opinion, at least in certain situations, plays a part in shaping policy, some approaches have focused on systemic factors such as the structure of the political system in order to explain the sensitivity of governments to public opinion (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000: 28; Risse-Kappen 1991). This approach may be useful in analysing changes to politicians' responsiveness to opinion over time, or in comparing different countries' responsiveness to the same issue, but is of less help when attempting to study the responsiveness of policy-makers to opinion on specific policy questions.

Other researchers have attempted to identify key variables that play a part in heightening policy makers' receptiveness to public opinion. Chambers and Goidel (2004) claim that public opinion is more relevant in relation to grand strategy and vision than specific policy decisions requiring specialist knowledge. According to Holsti (2004: 300-301), there are several key variables that can be used to distinguish case studies: the stage in the policy process, the context in which the policy decision is made, as well as the individual beliefs of policy makers. Of these three the decision context is potentially the most problematic for researchers attempting to investigate specific cases, as it encompasses a large number of factors, such as the international policy environment, the role assumed by the media, the proximity of elections, the government's grip on power, and internal party dynamics. Even investigating a seemingly straightforward variable such as the proximity of elections may uncover many new issues. Simply demonstrating the personal importance of the issue to voters does not guarantee that the government will take an opinion seriously, even when facing an election. Whether respondents are electorally important, whether the issue is going to affect their voting behaviour and whether they see the policies of the parties as different will all affect the likelihood of the government responding to opinion polls (Goot 2005: 196).

The high degree of variation in the context of each foreign policy-making decision means that a theoretical framework is needed to cut through the many layers of complexity, and Douglas Foyle (1999) has done some important work in this area. In examining decision-making contexts Foyle identifies four key scenarios where there is a high level of threat to existing goals or values. These four contexts are made up of

combinations of either a short or long decision-making period with an event that is either a surprise or anticipated. A crisis is when there is a surprise and little decision-making time available. A reflexive context is when there is anticipation but little time to make decisions. An innovative context is when there is surprise but a relatively long reaction time available. A deliberative context is when there is anticipation as well as a lengthy time for making policy decisions (Foyle 1999: 14-15). Each of these circumstances has different consequences for policy makers. In a deliberative situation the government will be able to feel out public reaction to new policy ideas as well as assess any potential political fallout that is likely to result, through the use of methods that would not be viable in a crisis, such as focus groups, polling, or even the leaking of policy documents. This framework allows for more systematic comparative research by ensuring that only case studies that fall into the same contextual category are compared with each other.

Once the general decision-making context has been identified, focusing on key policy actors will help to shed light on a number of areas. The role of individual policy makers is important because they are the ones who must make judgements that balance their own beliefs about the best policy position with the preferences of their party and the preferences of the voting public. Public opinion exerts a constraining influence on policy choices in that an unhappy public will vote a government out of office, but policy makers will often be able to exercise considerable discretion as to the policies they advance, and even under the most constraining circumstances will retain a certain amount of control in terms of policy implementation. Ultimately, policy decisions are not generally made by plebiscite and elections are not often won or lost on a single policy position. Key policy

makers must use their knowledge of public opinion and the issue context to determine the political viability of various policy options. The question of whether or not a policy is politically viable requires a subjective assessment based on the policy maker's beliefs about the importance of public opinion, their ability to convince or manipulate the public into supporting the policy, and their concerns over other factors such as the current popularity of the government and the ability of opposition parties to challenge the policy.

Foyle argues, like Holsti, that leaders' personal beliefs about the role public opinion should play in the making of foreign policy are a key factor in assessing the impact of that opinion (Foyle 1999: 2). Foyle identifies four major types of beliefs based on a combination of whether policy makers think that public input is necessary or not and whether they think it is desirable or not. If they think it is necessary and desirable then they are *delegates*; if they think it is desirable but not necessary then they are *executors*; if they think it is necessary but not desirable then they are *pragmatists*; and if they think it is neither necessary nor desirable they are *guardians* (10-14).

If policy makers scrupulously follow the delegate position that they must take mass opinion very seriously then they will have less tolerance for policies that move away from the majority position, at the risk of appearing 'populist' and lacking in leadership and conviction. If they follow the guardian position too closely and ignore public opinion, attempting to put in place their own agenda with little regard for public opposition, then they risk being seen as engaging in 'social engineering' and out of touch with political realities. Politicians must walk this fine line in order to appear both decisive

in leadership and in touch with their constituents while implementing as much of their and their party's policy agenda as possible.

Foyle (2004: 271-72) makes use of a technique from the history discipline – ‘process tracing’ – to examine the attitudes of key policy actors to public opinion. This involves an intensive study of the process of decision making in order to identify which factors the decision-making actors focus on, how they arrive at decisions and what policies actually eventuate.⁴ While this is more difficult to do when the policy makers are still in office, by also examining how they argue their position to the electorate we may be able to identify times when they feel pressure from the public such that they are compelled to make changes to existing or proposed policies, and may gain clues as to their beliefs about the role of public opinion and their concerns about other contextual factors. It is sometimes hard to separate a politician's public statements from their private views, and policy makers are often reluctant to credit public opinion with any role in important policy decisions, perhaps attempting to avoid being seen as following rather than leading. Because of this, assessments in this study about the beliefs of individuals based on their public statements must remain tentative, at least until they can be confirmed through further interviews and insider accounts. However, looking at policy makers' statements also allows the study to incorporate attempts by politicians to shape public perceptions, rather than seeing them as fully constrained by the decision-making environment. If a politician expresses a strong belief in his or her ability to ‘sell’ policies to the public, or claims that the public has not yet made up its mind on the issue, then he or she will also feel freer to lead the public away from the current majority position.

⁴ Foyle cites George and McKeown (1985).

Based on this review the key points to take up in analyzing the impact of public opinion on Australia's Asian engagement during the Howard era are the influence of context and the beliefs of Howard himself about the role of public opinion. As previously indicated, particular attention is given to relations with Indonesia and Asian immigration as two key issues highlighting important aspects of Howard's approach. In terms of context the Indonesian relationship has both deliberative and crisis aspects. The preferred long term approach of accommodating Indonesian interests was at times undermined by the need to deal with crises where there was considerable public outcry against Indonesia. As for the Asian immigration issue the context was more deliberative, with a policy accommodating public opinion as perceived by John Howard developed over a long period. With both issues Howard's approach to public opinion was essentially that of a pragmatist. He had his own views on what the correct course of action was but needed to 'manage' public opinion if he were not to suffer adverse political consequences.

In the sections that follow there is an attempt to outline Howard's general approach to the role of public opinion as it relates particularly to the issue of Asian engagement. Then there is a more detailed discussion of the Indonesian and Asian immigration issues from the perspective of the impact of public opinion on the policies of the Howard government. These sections follow the 'process tracing' method recommended by Foyle, making use of explicit primary sources where available while also putting some emphasis on the way in which events suggested the government was responding to or attempting to influence public opinion. For each section there is some

initial attention to the position of Paul Keating and his government as the immediate precursor to Howard and his government.

Public opinion and foreign policy: The Howard perspective

To understand the way in which the Howard government has responded to public opinion in terms of the specific issue of Asian engagement, it is helpful in the first instance to review the relationship between public opinion and the direction of the previous Keating Labor government. Focusing on the positions of Keating and Howard as the leaders of the two governments, the term ‘pragmatist’ as used in Foyle’s typology seems to apply to both. Both leaders believed that governments needed to ‘take account’ of public opinion, in the sense of ensuring political survival, while at the same time having strong views on what they thought the most desirable direction for government policy was, whether in relation to Asian engagement or any other issue. Dissonance between the leader’s perception of public opinion and his own views was to be reduced through the development of messages designed to win the public over. In the case of Keating, critics often suggested that his position was more akin to that of ‘guardian’, wanting to lead from in front and giving insufficient attention to keeping public opinion on side. Unlike the US one might argue that prime ministers in Australia had to take more account of the position of their parties; however with Australian politics becoming more ‘presidential’ this has become less of an issue, with political parties generally following the position enunciated by their leaders.

As prime minister, Keating had strong views on the direction Australia should take, encompassing a number of significant areas of policy. On the issue of Asian engagement Keating continued the position of the Labor government as developed since 1983 that it was strongly in Australia's interests to 'engage' across a range of areas (see Keating 2000). During the Keating period the focus was still very much on the Asian 'economic miracle', and the way in which growth in Asia could be used to strengthen the Australian economy (see Garnaut 1989). With Gareth Evans as foreign minister security engagement increasingly followed the pattern of 'cooperative security', aiming for security 'with' Asian countries rather than 'against' them (see Evans 1989). Under Keating engagement with Asia was to be fostered by facilitating important symbolic changes within Australia itself, quite frequently with important domestic as well as international consequences. One of these changes involved reconciliation with the indigenous people, signalled most clearly in Keating's Redfern speech of 10 December 1992 (see Watson 2002: 288-91). Another change that Keating wished to promote was Australia's transition to republican status (see Republic Advisory Committee 1993).

With these various areas of policy Keating's approach essentially was to move in the direction he favoured, while working concurrently to persuade the public and significant actors of the merits of the various policy changes. These issues were not ones where he assessed public opinion and then moulded his policies accordingly. Keating was a 'pragmatist' in that he realized that winning elections required having the public on side; his willingness to tailor policies proved insufficient in that his government was defeated in the 1996 elections.

Under John Howard the new Coalition government also had strong positions on a number of issues relating to Asian engagement. Howard was critical of Keating's perceived attempts to remake Australian identity along lines that would be more compatible with Labor objectives. Howard saw these attempts as undermining aspects of Australian life that he valued. Australians were exhorted to be 'relaxed and comfortable' about themselves. Howard was hostile to republicanism and favoured 'practical' reconciliation with the indigenous people rather than symbolic apologies for past treatment. In terms of international relationships he favoured a reaffirmation of the alliance with the US, believing that such an approach would further Australian interests and not put at risk the links with Asian countries.

An early test for Howard in relation to his perception of the significance of public opinion was the emergence of Hansonism as a political phenomenon at the time of the 1996 federal election (see Leach et al 2000). Pauline Hanson won the seat of Ipswich, near Brisbane, as an independent candidate; she had previously lost her Liberal endorsement after comments she had made about indigenous people. Subsequently One Nation, Hanson's political party, reached a high point at the time of the Queensland state elections in June 1998 when it won about a quarter of the popular vote. Howard's problem was that One Nation's conservative populism appealed to many Coalition supporters, particularly National Party voters. If One Nation maintained its momentum, the Coalition could find itself losing seats, with Queensland a major concern. At the same time Howard argued that it was legitimate for One Nation supporters to express their

views. Some One Nation positions were similar to Howard's own (especially on indigenous and immigration issues, but less so on economic and foreign policies), although the prime minister was more sophisticated in their presentation. Hansonism meant that Howard had to respond to conservative populist views being articulated within the electorate, both to shore up his own political base and to enable him to advance his own agenda. In behaving thus Howard was acting as a pragmatist, not conceding any ground on policy but managing the situation in such a way as to undermine support for One Nation.

Another important development that supports the characterisation of Howard as a pragmatist in relation to public opinion was the emergence of the 'war on terrorism' after September 11, 2001, and then the Iraq war from 2003. In this situation Howard had strong views as to what should be done, but needed to ensure that public opinion did not become too big an obstacle to implementing those views. In the aftermath of 9/11 Howard expressed strong support for the US, with the ANZUS Treaty being invoked by the Australian government in solidarity with its ally (Howard 2001). This action appeared to be perfectly consistent with public views on this matter (Goot 2007: 260-62). Similarly Australian support for US military operations in Afghanistan to depose the Taliban and destroy Al Qaeda facilities also appeared to have strong public support. When the Bush administration subsequently began preparing the way to launch a war in Iraq, the issue became more controversial in Australia. Public opinion in Australia was generally against war unless there was specific UN authorization; once the war commenced in March 2003, however, there was majority support (Goot 2007: 268-74). Howard's approach was to

argue strongly in favour of supporting the US in this conflict, emphasising both the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and the need to uphold the US alliance (see in particular Howard 2003a, 2003b). Even if public opinion was against war unless specifically authorised by the UN, Howard maintained his position on this matter, suggesting that he was veering towards a 'guardian' position. As Murray Goot (2003) writes: '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".'⁵

With the conflict in Iraq continuing and intensifying even after the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, public support for the war declined (see Goot 2007: 275-84). Howard maintained his arguments about the need for Australia to maintain its solidarity with the US. While the weapons of mass destruction argument foundered when no such weapons were found, Howard shifted his position to argue in favour of the political benefits of regime change for Iraq, the region and the world. Once battle had been joined in Iraq it was imperative that the US and its allies continued to support the democratically elected Iraqi government and to prevent the country becoming a haven for terrorists. Howard did not shift his position in response to critical public opinion, but attempted to make his case more persuasive by responding to the changing situation in Iraq and the region.

⁵ The quotation is from Fishkin (1991: 1).

The response to Hansonism and the ‘war on terrorism’ and Iraq provides important evidence about how Howard responds to public opinion. He is clearly revealed as a pragmatist, attempting to maintain his political goals while at the same time managing public opinion in such a way that it will not significantly impede those goals. This same orientation is evident in some specific aspects of Asian engagement that have arisen during the period of the Howard government: relations with Indonesia and Asian immigration.

Relations with Indonesia since 1996: The impact of Australian public opinion

Australia’s relationship with Indonesia is one area where Howard’s position as a ‘pragmatist’ in relation to public opinion is clearly revealed. Although it faced particular challenges of its own, the Howard government has broadly followed the policy towards Indonesia that developed under previous governments during the period of the New Order. This policy emphasised the importance of remaining on good terms with the Indonesian government. Australian governments saw Indonesia as a potentially unstable country. Conflicts within Indonesia could weaken the government there, making it more difficult to maintain the stability perceived to be in Australia’s interests. Both Labor and Coalition governments in Canberra had a strongly positive view of Suharto’s pro-Western orientation and his approach to economic development, particularly as compared to the radical and socialist orientation of Sukarno. This positive view of the New Order was a major factor underpinning the approach adopted by Australian governments towards the East Timor issue. Beginning with Gough Whitlam in 1974-75, Australian

governments supported the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia. Despite the large number of deaths as a result of the Indonesian occupation and events such as the Dili massacre in 1991, this was still the case under the Keating government in the early 1990s. From this perspective the best way to improve the lot of the East Timorese was to accept Indonesian rule and then to work with Indonesia on ways in which conditions in East Timor could be bettered. Under Keating the pro-Indonesian orientation reached a peak in 1995 with the conclusion of a security agreement between the two countries. This treaty could be taken as symbolic of the way in which Australian governments prioritised the relationship with Indonesia. In Keating's words in March 1994, 'No country is more important to Australia than Indonesia'. While there were public concerns about human rights issues in Indonesia, and particularly the plight of East Timor, these concerns were never sufficiently strong to pose a significant challenge to the pro-Indonesian stance of Australian governments.

This general approach continued initially under the Howard government. However various situations arose where the government had to take account of public opinion. These situations again revealed Howard to be a pragmatist in the way he dealt with public opinion, essentially attempting to 'manage' public opinion where he thought its expression could be damaging while at the same time adhering as much as possible to his preferred policy course. In this paper this point will be developed in relation to the East Timor crisis of September 1999, the Bali bombing of October 2002 and various developments affecting Australian-Indonesian relations during the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono from 2004.

The East Timor crisis of September 1999 was the single biggest issue affecting Australian-Indonesian relations during the period of the Howard government. The events leading to the crisis, and the aftermath of the crisis, have been extensively analysed (DFAT 2001; Greenlees and Garran 2002; Cotton 2004; Fernandes 2004). Most of the focus has been on the development of Australian diplomacy, including the factors that led Australian governments to behave as they did. One of these factors is the impact of public opinion on Australian policy. As indicated previously, public opinion had had little bearing on the way in which Australian policy towards Indonesia (including the East Timor issue) had developed during the period of the New Order. However, when mayhem descended on East Timor in the aftermath of the pro-independence result in the referendum of 30 August 1999, there was a public outcry in Australia. There was a perception that the Indonesian military and pro-Indonesian militias were deliberately undermining the referendum result, either to punish the East Timorese for voting the way they did or else to create conditions such that Indonesia would have to remain. Poll figures published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 14 September 1999 reveal the strength of Australian public opinion in response to this situation: 72 per cent of respondents supported the despatch of peacekeeping troops to East Timor, with 34 per cent saying that Australia should intervene even without UN authorization (see McDougall 2001: 191, footnote 20).

Even though public opinion was strongly in favour of Australia taking the lead in dealing with this issue, it would be oversimplified to argue that Australian policy was

simply based on the government responding to a strongly articulated public opinion. Howard's approach as a pragmatist meant that he developed a policy that was appropriate for Australian national interests as he saw them, while also accommodating the need to demonstrate to the public that the government was acting decisively to uphold East Timor's act of self-determination. From Howard's perspective it was clear that Indonesia could no longer deal effectively with the situation, and that the referendum result had to be respected. Australia was in a good position to exercise leadership in a situation that was very important for its own security. However, despite the views of a strong minority of the Australian public, Australia could not intervene in East Timor against Indonesian wishes; this would be tantamount to going to war with Indonesia.⁶ The intervention needed to be legitimised through a resolution of the United Nations Security Council. Indonesian consent to a UN-authorized intervention required strong international pressure, with the US being in the best position to exert such pressure. The Howard government's diplomacy was effective in preparing the way for international intervention, working particularly with the US and the UK at the Security Council, and also working with the US to put pressure on Indonesia. The APEC summit meeting, held in Auckland from 9 to 12 September 1999, was also useful as a context in which Indonesia could be put under international pressure on this issue.

Another situation in Australian-Indonesian relations where there were strong manifestations of public opinion was the Bali bombings on 12 October 2002, resulting in

⁶ '[U]nless there is some acknowledgement or acceptance by the Indonesians of the presence of an international force ... then it does amount to an invasion of another country. And no Australian Prime Minister is going to, in his right mind, get involved in that sort of situation' (Howard 1999a). See also Howard (1999b, 1999c).

the deaths of 202 people, including 88 Australians. In this situation the shock and outrage were shared equally by the Australian public and government. The challenge for the government was to channel these feelings into policy and actions that would be effective in dealing with the situation created by the tragedy. Public sentiment is not necessarily very conscious of the limits that recognition of sovereignty places on one government in taking action within the jurisdiction of another government. Apart from assistance in dealing with the immediate aftermath of the bombings, Australian policy has focused on developing police and intelligence cooperation with Indonesia as a means of avoiding further incidents (not completely successfully given the bombings that occurred subsequently in Jakarta and Bali⁷).

During the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono from October 2004, there have been a number of episodes that have again highlighted the issue of the impact of public opinion on the Howard government's approach to Asian engagement. The first of these was the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004, resulting in some 130,000 deaths in Aceh. As with the Bali bombings, there was a remarkable unanimity between the Australian public and the government on this matter, with great sympathy for the people affected by this natural disaster. Assistance offered by the Australian government made Australia the leading international donor in responding to the tsunami.⁸

⁷ Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta, 5 August 2003 (12 killed); bombing outside the Australian embassy in Jakarta, 9 September 2004 (at least 9 killed); Bali bombing, 1 October 2005 (20 killed, plus the 3 bombers).

⁸ For a more sceptical analysis suggesting Australia's commitment was simply a repackaging of existing aid to Indonesia, see AidWatch (2005).

More difficult situations relating to Australian public opinion arose with the cases of Schapelle Corby and the 'Bali Nine'.⁹ Corby was arrested in Bali in October 2004 on charges concerning the smuggling of marijuana. This offence is regarded much more seriously in Indonesia than in Australia, and Corby's subsequent conviction led to a sentence of twenty years being imposed. The issue attracted populist attention in Australia, Corby being portrayed as an innocent young woman who had been ensnared in a corrupt and unjust system. Even allowing for due process having been carried out, there was concern that Corby's sentence was too harsh for this particular offence. In the case of the 'Bali Nine', arrested in Bali in April 2005 on heroin smuggling offences, there was less doubt about the guilt of the accused but concerns that they were likely to be executed; cooperation from the Australian federal police had been instrumental in these arrests. The 'Bali Nine' were subsequently convicted and death sentences imposed (initially the two ringleaders, but rising subsequently to six). The problem for the Howard government with these issues was that loud expressions of public opinion, with highly negative perceptions of the Indonesian judicial system, were very likely to damage the cooperative relationship with Indonesia that the government sought. The government's approach, again reflecting Howard's position as pragmatist, was to defend Indonesia's integrity in these matters, while at the same time making representations to ensure that Corby and the 'Bali Nine' were dealt with fairly. Public opinion could thus be 'managed' while at the same time restricting any damage to the Australian-Indonesian relationship that would ensue if the Australian government appeared to go along with public opinion on these issues.

⁹ Corby tells her side in Corby with Bonella (2006).

On the West Papua issue, expressions of Australian public opinion have generally been low key. However there is the potential for public opinion to become more assertive in certain circumstances. Generally the Howard government has supported attempts to resolve the issue through the means of giving West Papua 'special autonomy' within Indonesia. It has opposed claims that West Papua should have an act of self-determination since this would be likely to result in a vote in favour of independence, thus undermining Indonesian national unity. Any suggestion that an Australian government was supporting self-determination for West Papua would have severe repercussions for Australian-Indonesian relations. When polled on this matter, a strong majority of Australians is normally in favour of self-determination for West Papua. A survey conducted by Newspoll in April 2006 indicated that 76.7 per cent of Australians supported West Papuan self-determination, 'including the option of independence' (Maiden 2006). The West Papua issue captured public attention in January 2006 when 43 Papuans reached Australia by sea and claimed political asylum; 42 of these people were granted that status in March 2006, with the forty-third (David Wainggai) following in August 2006. On the general issue of West Papua's status, the Howard government has been safely able to ignore public opinion because this question does not usually occupy a prominent place on the public agenda. A more 'deliberative' approach on the part of the government was therefore possible. On the specific issue of Papuan asylum seekers, the government attempted to restrict the ability of West Papuans to claim asylum by introducing legislation to have all 'boat people' arriving on the Australian mainland processed offshore. Government defections in the Senate led to the withdrawal of this legislation in August 2006 (Shanahan 2006); its implementation would be difficult in any

case because Papua New Guinea refused to cooperate (Jones 2006). As a pragmatist in relation to public opinion one might have expected Howard to give more consideration to public views but he adhered to the government's position prioritising the relationship with Indonesia. Part of the calculation here might have been that the Papuan asylum seeker issue would be relatively short lived and would cause no long term political damage to the government. Similarly there appeared to be a perception that Indonesia would be able to 'manage' the West Papua issue in such a way that it would not become a major conflict; Australian support for 'special autonomy' would assist Indonesia in its goal of retaining West Papua within the republic.

The Australia-Indonesia security agreement, signed by the two foreign ministers in November 2006, symbolised the close relationship that the Howard government sought with Indonesia.¹⁰ There was no adverse public reaction to this agreement, perhaps reflecting Howard's ability over the long term to achieve the goals that his government sought in this relationship. Public opinion concerning aspects of the relationship was an issue from time to time, but the government was generally able to manage this in such a way that it was not deflected from its goals. The East Timor crisis did involve greater modification of the government's goals, but this involved international circumstances that were much more extraordinary than in any other episode affecting the Australian-Indonesian relationship in the period since 1996.

¹⁰ The agreement includes a commitment not to 'support or participate in activities by any person or entity which constitutes a threat to the stability, sovereignty or territorial integrity of the other Party'. See DFAT (2006).

The Asian immigration issue: The relationship between public opinion and government policy

Asian immigration was another issue where public opinion was relevant to Australia's Asian engagement. Whereas the Australian-Indonesian relationship was a key dimension of Australia's external relations in the Asian region, the issue of Asian immigration was central to the future development of Australian society. It could be argued that the strongly domestic nature of the Asian immigration issue has meant that governments have had less scope for manoeuvre than has been the case with the Indonesian relationship; the former has a much more direct bearing than the latter on people's wellbeing. In the case of the Indonesian relationship there were both deliberative and crisis elements, with the issue of public opinion coming more to the fore in situations of crisis. In the case of Asian immigration the context has been more deliberative. The issue again shows Howard to be a pragmatist in relation to public opinion; he wants to have the public 'on side', and attempts to use persuasion to that end should there be significant opposition. In general Howard's perception has been that his own preferred position is consistent with public opinion, with perhaps some 'fine tuning' from time to time to reduce any dissonance that might arise. Howard's approach can be seen first of all in relation to the position he took under the previous Labor government (1983-96); then we can examine the main phases in the development of his policy since 1996.

Howard has generally taken a position in favour of a more integrated rather than a 'multicultural' Australia. Although Howard held a prominent position during the Fraser

government (Treasurer, 1977-83), he was never directly involved with immigration policy. He was not a significant influence on the development of multiculturalism and the acceptance of large numbers of Vietnamese refugees during the period of that government. The specific issue of Asian immigration came to the fore at the time of the Blainey debate in 1984. By this stage the Hawke Labor government was in office, and Howard was a significant figure on the Opposition front bench as Deputy Leader.¹¹ Professor Geoffrey Blainey made a speech to a Rotary gathering in Warrnambool, Victoria in March 1984, in which he cautioned against too high a rate of Asian immigration. He argued that this situation could lead to social tensions (Blainey 1984; see also Markus and Ricklefs 1985). Blainey came under attack for adopting what was construed by many to be a racist position. Nevertheless Howard was broadly sympathetic to Blainey's argument. This became clear in 1988 when the Opposition was formulating its immigration policy. The FitzGerald Report of June 1988 had argued for clear 'national interest' criteria in the development of immigration policy; this essentially meant emphasising economic criteria in the selection of immigrants, but continuing a non-discriminatory approach (Committee to Advise on Australia's Immigration Policies 1988). Adopting this approach would mean a higher proportion of immigrants coming from Asian countries. When asked to comment specifically on the rate of Asian immigration on 1 August 1988, Howard responded: 'I do believe that if it is in the eyes of some in the community, it's too great, it would be in our immediate term interest and supportive of social cohesion if it were slowed down a little, so that the capacity of the community to absorb was greater' (quoted in Kelly 1992; see also Markus 2001: 87-90).

¹¹ Howard succeeded Andrew Peacock as Opposition Leader in September 1985, holding that position until May 1989, and then returning again in January 1995.

Howard would not have seen any significant tension between his position and public opinion, believing that a significant proportion of Australians agreed with him.

Once in office as prime minister Howard's position on Asian immigration became more nuanced compared with what it had been during the 1980s. He now claimed to appreciate the contributions made by Asian immigrants to Australian society.

Nevertheless his perspective was still broadly integrationist: the more Asian immigrants accepted 'Australian values', the greater their contribution to Australian society would be. At the same time Howard's integrationist perspective undercut support for Hansonism by appealing to those supporters who valued social solidarity and rejected any special status for minorities, whether ethnic or otherwise. Recent evidence of Howard's approach is the renaming of the immigration department as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (dropping multiculturalism from the title) at the end of January 2007, and the moves to toughen citizenship laws in relation to English language proficiency and knowledge about Australia (including 'Australian values') (see Johnston 2007). While Howard's integrationist approach might be the underlying motivation for these changes, it should be noted that public concerns in the post-September 11 period have focused more on the position of Muslims (mainly of Middle Eastern origin) in the Australian community, rather than on Asian immigration as such.

In his prime ministerial phase Howard would again have seen little tension between the position he espoused on Asian immigration and public opinion on this matter. As a 'pragmatist', however, Howard found it appropriate to modify the way he

presented his views. This enabled him to avoid charges of being racist.¹² The way he did this was through the vehicle of a conservative Australian nationalism, emphasising ‘Australian values’ and ‘Australianness’ more generally. The terminology of multiculturalism was avoided, and a more integrationist approach was adopted. Asian immigrants were acceptable and could contribute positively within the umbrella of the ‘one Australian nation’. From Howard’s perspective support for the multicultural approach was largely confined to left-liberals and to ethnic organizations that had benefited financially from the ‘multicultural industry’.

Conclusion

Using Douglas Foyle’s typology this paper has argued that John Howard is a ‘pragmatist’ in the way he relates to public opinion. It is often politically necessary to take account of public opinion, but the main goal is to ensure the implementation of one’s own policy objectives. This approach is very relevant to Asian engagement as one of the key areas of Australian foreign policy. For the most part public opinion has not been a significant constraint on the policies of the Howard government in this area. One significant exception was Australian relations with Indonesia, particularly at the time of the East Timor crisis in 1999. While the Howard government had its own ‘national interest’ justification for the course adopted at this time, it also appeared to be influenced by the strength of public opinion in favour of intervention. Subsequent expressions of public

¹² Andrew Markus (2001) argues that Howard’s approach to Asian immigration and other issues with a racial component (such as policy towards indigenous people) was largely motivated by racial considerations. Judith Brett (2003: chapter 9) believes that Howard’s approach is motivated by a commitment to liberal individualism; government policy should focus on the position of people as individuals rather than as members of ethnic groups or any other kinds of groups.

opinion in relation to Indonesia have generally been managed in such a way that the government has not been significantly deflected from its preferred policies. On the issue of Asian immigration the context has been more deliberative and less influenced by particular crises. Howard's caution about Asian immigration as manifested in the 1980s has been less a feature of his approach during his tenure as prime minister; the emphasis has been on 'integration' and eschewing any hint of multiculturalism. Howard has believed that public opinion is in line with his approach rather than a constraint that needs to be managed.

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