

The Development and Reception of Public Opinion Polling in Australia 1920-1945

by
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A thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Discipline of History in the School of International Studies,
Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia, December 2014.

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Abstract

This thesis attempts three main tasks: first to chronicle the development of opinion polling in Australia between 1920-1945; second to argue that the structure of opinion polling in Australia has largely been the result of a combination of developments in statistical method, marketing and social enquiry in Britain and the United States and their application to local conditions; third, to analyse historical attitudes towards polling and the debates that surrounded its introduction in Australia and to show that the initial reserve shown by politicians was directly linked to the idea of an engaged and competent citizenry and what they believed was an attack against the traditional practice of politics and their relationship with their constituents, and the involvement of those within the newspaper industry who had vested interests. Although it is not a comparative study, a focus of this research considers why it was that Australian politicians were so much slower to accept public opinion research than their British and American colleagues.

The thesis will document the contributions of the market research industry, the newspaper industry, primarily Keith Murdoch's Herald and Weekly Times Group, and the work of those in the universities who championed social surveys, to the growth of public opinion polling. The thesis will show that the eventual manifestation of political opinion polling during the Second World War, and one that would come to dominate Australian polling until 1972, when Rod Cameron created Australian National Opinion Polls as a competitor, was a direct result of the combination of international developments that took on a distinctly Australian flavour during the period 1920-1945.

A number of restrictions have been placed on this thesis, namely the difficulty of accessing the records of Morgan Poll and some copyright conditions attached to the records of the Ashby research service. This has necessitated an approach that views the events largely through some specialised secondary sources combined with an analysis of newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, political statements and the results of the polls themselves. Australian historians have shown little interest in the development of opinion polling, apart from a number of studies that have investigated the media and the evolution of marketing thought.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Simon King

December 2014

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my thanks to a number of staff within the History Discipline of the School of International Studies at Flinders University. To Professor Eric Richards for your supervision and for your support and perceptive insights that always got me back on track when I went off at tangents, and for advising me to keep it simple. To my associate supervisor Dr Andrekos Varnava, thanks for your thoughts especially in the latter stages when I contemplated power in Australian media and politics. To Dr Catherine Kevin who encouraged me to keep going and to Dr Matt Fitzpatrick for always being willing to listen and for all the administrative details as Post Graduate Coordinator.

To the Postgraduate Lunch Society, all of whom were invaluable with their advice, comments and criticisms over innumerable cups of coffee, lunches and the odd dinner. Thanks go to Storm Graham, Bronte Gould, Darryl Burrowes, Ann Matters, Marilyn Arnold, Iliya Marovich-Old and the others who wandered in and out. Three special mentions go to Danny Laurie-Fletcher fellow seeker of the truth and follower of the great game for our many chats about cricket and history and for at times helping me to steer through the labyrinthine world of academia. And to Stephanie James for your kind and always generous support both in terms of my writing but also for your kind advice when things just got too much, you always knew what to say to smooth the waters. To Darren Dobson at Monash who was always willing to read my work and offer advice, thanks mate I could not have done it without your encouragement.

A big thank you to the staff at the Flinders University Library, and in particular the staff in Documentary Delivery Services who always came through with everything I

asked for, no matter how unusual. Another thank you goes to the staff of the National Archives for their assistance in finding what I couldn't, similarly to the staff at the Mitchell Library and the University of Melbourne Archives who helped me, when I asked the impossible, to make it happen.

To my family, my wife Wendy and my children Sarah, Alex and Josh; writing a thesis is a long and arduous task with much time spent poring over books and documents and over the computer and in my case with me ignoring the plea to play Xbox or take me to the movies, and with, in my case extended absences on research trips. I couldn't have done any of this without your love and forbearance. And for Si who kept asking me why the hell I was writing about opinion polls, read this and you'll see why.