

# **‘Australia Speaks’: Reactions to Political Opinion Polls in Australia 1941-1943**

*Simon King*

## **Abstract**

*Political opinion polls came to Australia in the first years of World War Two. Their entry into the political arena caused much discussion about the role of the polls and about their creators. Despite the best efforts of the pollsters the early reaction was one of suspicion and outright aggression. This paper investigates the critical first two years and the debates that took place between the pollsters and the government.*

*This paper has been peer reviewed*

On October 4 1941 under the headline ‘Pay Equity for Women favoured: Result of Australia’s First Gallup Poll’ political polling was born in Australia. The general tone surrounding the poll’s release was that it was something new and revolutionary and that these exercises in gauging the mood of the public would provide the government with something that they had never had before, they would immediately deliver specific information about reaction to announcements, future plans, and in the context of the Second World War, government performance. The pollsters also strongly emphasised their democratic value with the *Adelaide Advertiser* claiming, ‘the power of the polls are inviolable, they represent a real advance in democratic representation.’<sup>1</sup> Not everyone however shared these ideas. As this paper will seek to demonstrate from the beginning of polling in Australia there were those who attacked the value of polling and their originators methodology arguing that

polls were ill advised and an impediment to the very democratic principles that they espoused. They also attacked the editor of the *Melbourne Herald*, Keith Murdoch, who had organised the introduction of polling and who had sent a young employee, Roy Morgan, to Princeton New Jersey to learn from George Gallup, the founder of the Gallup Poll.

The purpose of this paper is to examine public and private reactions to the release of the first Gallup Polls in Australia in October 1941 and the campaign to interest the Curtin led Labour Government in the value of polling. It will demonstrate that some within the union movement and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) opposed polling because of the involvement of Keith Murdoch and because they were suspicious of the pollsters' motives. Secondly, it will show that the pollsters undertook a sustained letter writing campaign to attract the interest of the Labor Government, and that although the Government and Curtin repeatedly ignored their requests, there were those, particularly in the security services, who took active steps to maintain surveillance on the activities of the polling organisations and the questions they were asking. Underlying this discussion is the debate about democracy, particularly during wartime. One of the central points is that in making their cases both sides used the same arguments about the ability of opinion polls to affect the democratic process.

In considering these questions it is important to recognise that the polling industry in Australia derived its influences from the United States. However, unlike the situation in that country, where the federal Government and pollsters were in constant dialogue, in Australia the polling organisations were largely ignored.

## **Negative Reactions to polling – The Union Movement and the A.L.P.**

In Australia the denigration of the Murdoch Polls were focused on three areas; their influence on the political process, their cost and methodology, and the influence of Murdoch. Even before the first poll's results were released criticisms were aimed at Murdoch and the ideology of the polls, especially the notion that they were scientific or representative, or indeed in the public interest. *Smith's Weekly*, the newspaper that was best known for championing the interests of war veterans and for searching revelations of corruption wrote:

No more crass idea has ever crossed the Pacific to Australia than that of the Gallup Polls... In essence Australian Public Opinion Polls is just another cheap newspaper stunt, all the more despicable because it seeks to hide under a scientific cloak.<sup>2</sup>

This point was reiterated in October when the *Worker* (Australia) warned that 'workers should be aware of this Yankee stunt'.<sup>3</sup> The central plank of their arguments were that the polls would be unrepresentative, with the two articles questioning the reliability of the methods used and their trustworthiness as indicators of opinion.

It did not take long for some Labor politicians to express their concerns about the new phenomenon. In a letter to the Prime Minister John Curtin, the Minister for Customs, Senator Richard Keane wrote:

I am attaching a copy of correspondence which I have received from the East St Kilda branch of the Australian Labor Party concerning Gallup Polls. The issues raised by this organisation concerning this subject are, in my opinion, quite sound. I

personally believe that these polls are, dangerous and it is undesirable for them to continue...I have asked your colleague the attorney general to look into this and furnish me with his comments but am bringing this to your notice.<sup>4</sup>

Senator Keane started life in politics with the Victorian Railways Union and after it amalgamated with similar state bodies in 1920 he became the secretary of the Australian Railways Union, a position he held from 1925-1929.<sup>5</sup> His reaction to the polls was based on two factors; first his involvement with the Unions who were largely suspicious of Murdoch's conservative political outlook and secondly his own deeply held distrust of Murdoch the man. Don Rawson, who has written widely on the union movement in Australia, explained that:

He [Keane] had a longstanding antipathy to 'the Murdoch press' and was quoted as saying, and repeating, that Sir Keith Murdoch was 'a damn scoundrel'.<sup>6</sup>

Keane like many who were actively involved in the union movement in the 1930's complaints were based on what they saw as the campaign that had been undertaken in the Murdoch controlled press including; *The Herald* (Melbourne), *The Courier Mail* and *The Advertiser* (Adelaide) against the Unions.

The East St Kilda branch of the ALP had been making representations for three months to whomever they could in Government about the dangers that they believed were inherent in the Gallup Polls. On 12 June 1942 the Secretary, Mr P. Nash, in his first letter to Prime Minister Curtin wrote:

At the last meeting of the St Kilda East Branch A.L.P. the following resolution was carried. This branch of the A.L.P. urges

the Federal Government to take immediate steps to prevent the public being misled by publications in the daily press pertaining to the so called “Gallup Method” which are frequently appearing in the Melbourne *Herald*, and its syndicated papers in Australia under the title “Australia Speaks”, “Public Opinion Polls” and “Nationwide Polls” etc.<sup>7</sup>

The letter went on to ask that the papers should be made to provide information regarding the numbers of people polled, addresses of those polled and the class of employment. They also wanted details of the interviewers and most importantly the cost of each poll. The implication in this was that during wartime such exercises would be a waste of resources that could be better spent elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The Government reply from the Chief Censor in the Department of Information, E.G. Bonney, who was responsible solely for matters relating to the censorship of what was written or spoken about in the broadcast media, was that since the polls did not breach any of the censorship regulations the Government had no power to compel them (the Murdoch/Morgan organisation) to cease their activities<sup>9</sup>. An even more forthright communication was sent by Curtin on July 24:

The question of whether or not the polls truly effect the opinion of the general public is of course a matter of opinion but the sponsors claim that the analysis of Australian findings has demonstrated a high standard of accuracy. I recognise that these attempts to gauge public opinion on national questions may be misleading, and from the governments point of view in that they may place certain actions in a most unfavourable light.<sup>10</sup>

Although these replies from the government explained that nothing could be done about Murdoch’s polls this did not halt the complaints. If anything they increased in severity and frequency. The letters and complaints reached their height when in September,

Keane passed on the contents of an earlier report prepared by the St Kilda group that left no one in any doubt about their attitude to polling. Under the heading, ‘The Prostitution of Democratic Principles as practiced by the “*Herald*” in the “Gallup” polls’. The report decried the methods and the secrecy that surrounded the working of the polls and claimed that, ‘the Gallup method as practiced by the Herald must be condemned as valueless and utter trash.’<sup>11</sup> The report was specific in its criticism of the small sample size:

But personally, I firmly believe that it is impossible to obtain a true nation-wide public opinion on any subject by letting a few canvassers loose for a few days on some streets, cafes and offices and allow them to rush at people, asking them a few silly questions and then hurriedly requesting an answer.<sup>12</sup>

The largest and one suspects the major issue for the St Kilda sub-branch was the relationship between the polling organisation, Murdoch, and his newspaper chain. This relationship was condemned as ‘appalling’ and the prospect of them being used for ‘private gain’ and ‘not being used fraudulently’ came to the fore.<sup>13</sup> Again Curtin thanked Keane for his comments and those of the St Kilda branch and explained that their comments had been recorded and passed on to the relevant Commonwealth authorities.<sup>14</sup>

The critique of the new polls was not confined to the federal sphere. Even earlier than Senator Keane’s letters, the Hobart Trades and Labour Council and the Premier of Tasmania, Robert Cosgrove, had written to Curtin. In a letter written on 20 May the Trades and Labour Council stated:

I am directed by a resolution of members to bring under notice... the matter of Gallup Polls. The members ... have endeavoured to investigate the method of the collection of information used for

the publication of Polls on public questions, which are published from time to time. We have been unable to trace any source where opinions have been sought from the general public in regards to various matters on which Polls have been allegedly repeatedly taken and results published. The council is of the opinion that the information is entirely misleading and false.<sup>15</sup>

Their position was supported by Robert Cosgrove, who described his concerns about the value of polling and urged Curtin to take steps to investigate the polls and those conducting them.<sup>16</sup> Curtin penned what was by now becoming a familiar response saying that they were private and that whilst he understood they were at times ‘misleading’, he believed that the public understood that despite what the pollsters wrote about full disclosure of information in time of war this was not always possible.<sup>17</sup>

The newspapers, apart from the Murdoch controlled press, and the majority of politicians were remarkably quiet about the polls. One of the first instances occurred immediately after the release of the first poll results when Ben Chifley, the Treasurer, was asked about the results of a poll which showed 50% of people favoured compulsory loans and higher taxation. Chifley replied that he had doubts about the value of public opinion polls and whether they truly represented what the public thought: ‘Without knowing the way they are conducted it is hard to tell.’<sup>18</sup> This was the Government line; that although they believed at times that the polls were unrepresentative there was not much they could do about them, as they were privately owned. Not everyone though was suspicious about the polls’ methodology or representativeness, there were those who urged the government to look into what information the polling data could provide and whether this could be used as a tool to help prosecute the war, especially in gaining public support. This did not reflect international experience where

in Great Britain and the United States polling had quickly been recognised for its utility.

### **Support for the Polls**

In the United States the polls had been seized upon by politicians very quickly. President Roosevelt was especially interested and maintained contact with Hadley Cantril, director of the Office of Public Opinion Research based at Princeton University.

Roosevelt regarded the reports sent to him the way a general would regard information turned in by his intelligence services as he planned the strategy of a campaign. As far as I am aware Roosevelt never altered his goals because public opinion was against him or was uninformed. Rather he utilised such information to try to bring the public around to a course of action he felt was best for the country.<sup>19</sup>

This point is supported by Berinsky,<sup>20</sup> Casey<sup>21</sup> and Converse<sup>22</sup> who have examined the impact of polling on America during wartime and all point the broad usage of polling, both political and academic, in the war effort. In Great Britain, the British Institute of Public Opinion and the anthropologically minded Mass Observation Group began conducting studies on civilian morale on a monthly basis for the Ministry of Information.

In Australia there were those who recognised the potential of polling and communicated this. Richard Casey, Australian Minister to the United States of America, wrote to the Minister of Information, who just happened to be Keith Murdoch, on May 6 1940. Casey who was very successful in the United States,<sup>23</sup> and who had access to President Roosevelt, had become interested in public relations and was an early convert to opinion polls<sup>24</sup> stated:

An important phenomenon has arisen in America in the last year or so in the shape of researches into the state of public opinion on subjects of the day... When I first arrived here I was somewhat naturally inclined to discount the importance and reliability of such “polls” principally by reason of the fact that the “sample” of opinion was only small fraction of the population. However, I came to find that the “Gallup Poll” and the “Fortune Poll” were very widely accepted as being true reflections of American public opinion, based on the fact that they had been proven right, within small limits, by subsequent public votes at many elections.<sup>25</sup>

Casey’s letter continues to express some disquiet with the polls accuracy but explains that many American congressmen have come to view them as a tool for examining the mind of the public.<sup>26</sup> There were others who had the same view as Casey and between 1942 and 1943 the Government received a series of letters from those advocating the use of polling offering their services.

On 5 February 1942, Mr G.M. Chambers, Director of Bebarfald’s Ltd Furniture Store, which listed its address as across from the Sydney Town Hall on the prestigious corner of George and Park Street, wrote to the Prime Minister and to opposition leader Arthur Fadden. Bebarfald’s, which had been opened in 1872 in a building in Pitt Street advertising itself as a new and second hand furniture warehouse, had become one of the pre-eminent furniture retailers in Sydney. From the early 1930s the company recognised the power of the medium of radio that they employed in promotional activities.<sup>27</sup> They installed a studio on the fifth floor of the building and conducted two radio programmes daily through 2KY. Chambers wrote:

We believe that we could be of considerable assistance to your government by obtaining a test of public opinion on national

questions ... our company is just about to start a session over the air inviting the public to express their opinion on matters of national interest. The for and against the proposal would be submitted by leading authorities and competent speakers on the subject. The public would be invited to express their views and register their opinions ... The most important part of this test of public opinion would probably be that it would be a guide to the government on what the people want, as no doubt, the policy of the government is to carry out the demands of the people. Unless the government takes a referendum on these matters, it does not know the feeling on the matter any decision reached by the government as to what the people want could only be guesswork.<sup>28</sup>

In his further comments Chambers explained that the survey would be run through 2UW, who at the time had one of the largest listening audiences in Sydney. He also stressed that the exercise would not be of any cost to the Government as both Bebarfald's and 2UW would fund the survey. His letter stands out for two reasons; first that he defines public opinion as being derived from experts whose ideas percolate down and are commented upon by those who actually listen or are interested enough to have something to say. It is not a scientifically determined sample of the population because it is open only to those who listen to one particular station, unlike the Gallup Polls that take into account socio-economic and gender variables based on census figures. In addition it does not ask questions that have been formulated without bias and they do not address specific issues; for instance, are you satisfied with the performance of the present federal government or if an election were held today who would you be more likely to vote for? Second, Chambers attempts to link the proposed idea of using the radio station with the work undertaken by George Gallup:

Investigations by the Gallup organisation in the United States and by other authorities, have proved that a survey of 10,000 people's opinion would be within 10% correct as compared with the result you would get a survey of 100,000 people.<sup>29</sup>

The central issue with Chamber's proposal, and his linking it with Gallup was that the formula that was proposed was similar to the one used by the *Literary Digest*, one that created a furore in the United States in 1936 during the Presidential Election Campaign.

The *Literary Digest* was a magazine created by the publishers Funk and Wagnall in 1890. Its emphasis throughout its operation was on the analysis of opinion and commentary on political life and issues in the United States.<sup>30</sup> As part of the commentary on politics the editors instituted a poll of the readership before each Presidential election between 1916 and 1936.<sup>31</sup> Prior to 1936 its method had been sound with the *Digest* successfully predicting the winner. In 1936 the readers selected Alf Landon the Republican candidate to be the next president. It was wrong by a substantial margin. It was found that the ballot that was sent out to the readership was based on a small number of variables:

It simply relied upon various lists of citizens gathered from phone directories and auto registration records and sent out ... ballots asking citizens to mark their preferences.<sup>32</sup>

The problem was that during 1936, when America was still recovering from the worst effects of the depression, only those with substantial assets could either own a phone or a car, and, for that matter, could subscribe to a magazine. Like the *Literary Digest*, Bebarfalds were proposing a system that was flawed from the beginning based as it was on an imperfect and unrepresentative

sample of the population.<sup>33</sup> Bebarfald's offer was supported by the leader of the opposition in the Federal Parliament, Arthur Fadden, who in writing to Curtin spoke of Chambers being a 'reliable and highly respected member of the community.'<sup>34</sup> Despite Fadden's support Curtin's reply to Chambers was short. He acknowledged the offer and explained that he would refer it to the Minister of Information. No reply was forthcoming and Bebarfald's offer came to nothing. Curtin's answer reveals to an extent his indecision about the pollsters. He and many of his contemporaries were either dismissive or unsure of what the polls could do in a political sense. This is put into stark relief when another letter recommending polling is made to Curtin by a radio network in Western Australia.

Whitford's Broadcasting Network had a large share of the radio market in Western Australia and had already spent some time conducting a poll on the public attitudes to the war and the war effort.<sup>35</sup> One of its political and economic commentators, Edward Beeby, wrote to Curtin on 16 September 1942:

I recently called for a poll from listeners on the following question:

*"Whether or not, making due allowances for what might be considered as mistakes, the Curtin Government has proceeded with sincerity and vigour in the organisation of the Australian Nation for a total War Effort?"*

The poll was carried out over a period of nine days between 21<sup>st</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> August. The results of the poll was as follows:-

TOTAL VOTES CAST ... 6, 784

The listeners who replied in the affirmative to the question were 6,722 and those in the negative ... 62. The votes were sent by letter to 298 country centres which included Esperance Bay, Marble Bar and towns on the Trans. Railway.

City and Suburban centres which went as far as Armidale and Rockingham were also received, a total of 361 centres.

I pass the information on to you for what it is worth to indicate the extent and spread of the support which your Government is receiving, and is likely to receive in the future.<sup>36</sup>

Whitford's poll was more in keeping with that done by Roy Morgan. It used a recognisable sample, one based in city and country areas. It also had the advantage of asking only one question. Despite this improvement in design the reply from the Prime Minister was again short and to the point and conveyed more accurately what his feelings were about the use of polling:

I desire to acknowledge the receipt of, and to thank you for your letter of 16<sup>th</sup> September ... In reply, I can only say that the Government, in it's direction of Australia's war effort has not allowed itself to be influenced by public feeling, but has been inspired by a strong resolve to win this war irrespective of cost or of sectional interests.<sup>37</sup>

The reply confirms that, initially, Curtin was wary of the polls; it also mirrors the comments by his fellow politicians. As the evidence shows repeatedly, the offers of help from these amateur pollsters, and the potential of this medium were dismissed verbally and in writing. Whilst the amateurs were rebuffed the professional pollsters also applied pressure on Curtin and offered their services.

### **The Pollsters and the Government**

From the very beginning Roy Morgan sought to interest the authorities in the potential value of the polls. Writing to Curtin on December 21 1942 he said:

The Australian newspapers which have met the cost of establishing and operating the Gallup sample referendums in Australia have asked me to inform you that the services of this organisation are available at all times to assist your department and the Government generally ...Copies of this letter could be distributed by you to all Government Departments.<sup>38</sup>

The reply was slow, presumably due to the fact that Morgan's offer had indeed been passed on to the various departments for their replies. It was not for a full six months that any communication was forthcoming. On May 6, the secretary of the Prime Minister's Department wrote 'it will not be possible to take advantage of your offer at this juncture.'<sup>39</sup> The department that utilised the type of statistical approach that Morgan and Gallup insisted upon was the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics. Established in 1905, its task was initially to unify statistical collection, a task that had proven difficult due to state duplication and self-interest. However, with the outbreak of the Second World War, and the transfer of income taxation to the federal government, the role of the central bureau expanded. The head statistician, Stanley Carver, was one of those who appeared interested in the new system and wrote to Morgan enthusiastically explaining that his Department had not received any information but would like to be given 'any explanatory literature that you may have on the subject.'<sup>40</sup> Morgan waited for a reply in vain; nothing more was heard from the Bureau and Morgan resumed his campaign of trying to interest the Government.

Another pollster who tried to convince Curtin was Stuart Lucy of Ashby Research Services. Lucy wrote to Curtin on 14 January 1943 expressing incredulity that no one had begun utilising the results of polls and stating the benefits of any such scheme. His

letter, which was four pages long, put forward a number of propositions. Australia was suffering from low civilian morale, with high absenteeism in industry and apathy towards the war and the effort needed to win. This was reflected in a low take up of war loans amongst the civilian population. He explained that his company could provide the Government with statistics on what the public were thinking, their attitude to the war, and that his organisation had the experience, the staff and the resources to understand the public mind. He claimed that the reason why public opinion polls had not been employed was that there was a general lack of knowledge within both the Government and the public service, especially at the department head level, about the purpose of opinion polls and what they could do to assist in policy formulation and in galvanising people's enthusiasm and support for the war. He stressed finally that:

The strength of a Democratic country such as Australia rests in the people, and if the people are studied and their wants considered, there is nothing that they will not do. To obtain maximum co-operation and enthusiasm for the War Effort such as increased production, decreased consumption of essential commodities and ready responses to War Loan appeals, you must be kept constantly advised on public opinion.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Bebarfald's or Whitford's who were organisations with little experience of polling, or Morgan who was relatively new to the world of polling, Ashby's had a much longer pedigree.

Sylvia Ashby had been working in market research and commercial polling since 1929 and her company had been operating in Sydney for seven years. Ashbys had conducted some local small-scale political polls and were a known entity whose claims to have experience and resources were no idle boast. The Government's

response though was the same as all of their previous ones. ‘While your desire to assist the war effort is appreciated, it is regretted that it will not be possible to utilise the services of your organisation at this juncture.’<sup>42</sup> Again the Government refused to countenance the possibility of making any use of the results of polls or even to employ the polling organisations.

Publicly the reaction was one of indifference or of ridicule and there are reasons why this occurred; Curtin said that ‘we are steadfast in our efforts to defeat the enemy. The general tone of his replies was that he was too busy to be bothered with a system that many politicians did not understand or thought was an impediment to their decision-making. Curtin, the Labor Party and the opposition were busy fighting a war and given that Curtin’s speeches were unremitting in expressing the need for a constant and united war effort the polls could be viewed as a distraction. In the circumstances, as Winston Churchill explained, during wartime what the allied countries needed was needed positive leadership, he noted, *‘nothing is more dangerous in wartime than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of the Gallup Poll always feeling one’s pulse and taking one’s temperature.’*<sup>43</sup> Public Opinion polls that constantly reminded the political leadership of their inadequacies would be unwelcome. Another and more fundamental issue is that unlike the United States and Great Britain there was no history of social surveying or polling of the type that had been in those countries. No one apart from the early devotees really understood the new system. Although these early responses were all negative, leading to the impression that no one was really interested, there were those within the Government who were only too aware of the polls.

## **The Security Services and the Polling Organisations**

Throughout the war Australia's internal security services tried to keep track of whomever was deemed a threat to national security; this included those who supplied information to the enemy. Even before Morgan released the results of his first poll in October 1941 a series of letters and reports had passed between the Director General of Security and the Criminal Investigation Branch Special Bureau, the forerunner to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. These focused on two areas, the operation of polling organisations and their potential for supplying information to the enemy, and the involvement of those that were deemed as security risks.

On 27 August 1942, in a report titled 'Activities Of Ashby Research Services', Inspector Watkins pointed out that the police and the security services had investigated Sylvia Ashby and Stuart Lucy<sup>44</sup> as early as 1939:

The activities of the Lucy's both came under notice of this section on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1939. The matter was investigated and military authorities were appraised of this result on 3/11/39. Since then due to subsequent complaints of the activities of the activities of the canvassers employed, further enquiries have been made and I.S.G.S.<sup>45</sup> ... a special submission recommending that Ashby Research Services should not be granted any form of press pass was submitted from this Section to I.S.G.S.<sup>46</sup>

One of the first issues was that the polling that was being done relied upon interviewers. The complaints that were received were that these people were asking questions that were of a sensitive

nature. At the time campaigns had been run by the Department of Information that told the public to be careful who they talked to.

The Ashbys' again came to the notice of the authorities in 1942 and 1943. In 1942, as the previous report showed, the nature of their business and the transmittal and communication with third parties was a matter of concern. This was again raised when the Deputy Director of Security for Queensland wrote to the Director General of his department. The subject of this was to argue that those who undertook public opinion polling should be placed under greater levels of scrutiny. It goes on to shed light on the fact that investigations centred on Mr and Mrs Jan Grichtling who had previously been watched due to their un-Australian activities. Mrs Grichtling had since been appointed by Roy Morgan as an interviewer, and this had become a matter of concern. The deputy director explained that an XRD Mail Scrutiny order had been put in place where all the Grichtling's mail was to be opened and examined. In the same letter the matter of the Ashbys was again raised:

Some time back when dealing with the Ashby Research Services it was suggested that an X.R.D Censorship be placed on their mail to ascertain if they were writing to any suspects in the various states... advice would be appreciated as to whether a similar Censorship was made on the distribution lists of the Australian Public Opinion Polls in Melbourne.<sup>47</sup>

It is obvious from this that the level of scrutiny was high and that there was concern, not only about the results, but also who would produce them and who would see them.

Morgan and the Australian Public Opinion Polls (APOP) were also a subject of discussion. Barely a month had passed since the first

poll results were released when J.B. Magnusson an inquiry officer for the Commonwealth Investigation Branch wrote a report regarding the new company and how it conducted business. Magnusson described a poll that showed that 69% of Australians supported having ties with the Soviet Union. His report was very specific detailing the methods used, what the current polls showed and what the questions were in the next series of polls. Although Magnusson did not express any reservations about the APOP the fact was that the security services were interested enough to keep a watching brief on Morgan.

This watching brief expanded with the Grichtling letters and the XRD order, and was to become more intrusive when, on 7 July 1943, T. Graham, the Deputy Director Security, wrote to his superior sending him a copy of a letter that had been sent from Roy Morgan to George Gallup's organisation in Princeton New Jersey. Attention was drawn to the description of how the Australian organisation conducted its polls.<sup>48</sup> In an accompanying report Graham wrote on 8 July, he explained what Morgan wrote and pointed to the fact that there was a steady correspondence between the two organisations.<sup>49</sup> Graham was concerned about who was financing this poll and why, pointing out that it was financed by a group calling itself the Australian-American Co-operation Movement. Unbeknownst to Graham the organisation was closely linked to the Department of Information and had received a grant of £1,650 in 1941 to further the activities of the group. It was also important because Keith Murdoch founder of APOP, who was at the time Director of the Department of Information, organised the creation of a Victorian Branch.<sup>50</sup> Even at this stage, in mid 1943 when Ashbys had been polling for almost three years and Morgan for almost two, a close eye was being kept on what the polling

organisations were doing, indicating that there was still some suspicion about their activities.

## **Conclusion**

What inferences then can we draw about initial attitudes towards polling in Australia? Despite the efforts of the pollsters who suggested that they could improve the democratic process; they were regarded as unscientific and an impediment to democracy by many within the political sphere; as a Yankee plot and an attack on the union movement by Keith Murdoch and his conservative newspapers. Although the pollster and the media emphasised the potential for the polls, their requests to the Government to use them to assist in the war effort were met with constant polite refusal. For Curtin though the issue came down to one of his being single minded in his desire to fight the war without any groups interfering with the process. At the same time though, the value of the Polls were only too obvious to the security services who viewed them and the people who conducted them with some suspicion and used all of their resources to keep track of their activities. The other issue that runs throughout these early reactions to polling is the issue of democracy, particularly democratic participation during wartime. Is it the case that the government hid behind what could be called the cloak of wartime necessity? Their reluctance to pay any attention to what the polls offered could be evidence of their refusal to allow for the complete freedom of expression that the polls represented. There is a measure that in needing to pursue their war aims they wanted to avoid what Curtin called the vested interests. In truth the Government of course wanted to win the war, but as the involvement of the security apparatus demonstrates they were prepared to ignore the democratic impulse in order to successfully prosecute the war. This continued denial of the

pollsters though hid a much more deliberate program of surveillance. The files of the security service hide the reality of this democratic process. From the early part of the war the government were actively seeking to determine what the public was thinking, but they wanted to be firmly in control of the process, rather than leaving it to those who had their own agenda.

---

## About the Author

Simon King is a PHD candidate in the School of International Studies, Discipline of History, at Flinders University. His thesis examines the emergence of opinion polling in Australia, especially the influence of politics during World War Two. His research interests are the development of opinion polling and its effect on the political process; the Mass Observation group and their influence on social surveying in Australia, and comparative histories of polling.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Dr Gallup will have disciples here," *The Advertiser*, Saturday August 16 1941.

<sup>2</sup> "Public Opinion Polls – The Folly of Trial Gallups," *Smith's Weekly*, April 26 1941.

<sup>3</sup> "Gallup Polls – Workers Should Be Aware of Yankee Stunt," *Worker*, Tuesday 21 October 1941.

<sup>4</sup> NAA, *Letter from Minister for Customs R.V. Keane to the Prime Minister John Curtin* M1415, 28 Jan 1942 - 24 Dec 1942.

<sup>5</sup> Don Rawson, "'Keane, Richard Valentine (1881–1946)'" <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/keane-richard-valentine-10663/text18951> (accessed 10 June 2012).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> NAA, *Letter to the Hon J. Curtin M.H.R., Prime Minister* 12 June 1942.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> NAA, *Letter to P.L. Nash Secretary East St Kilda Branch A.L.P.* 24 July, 1942

<sup>11</sup> NAA, *The Prostitution of Democratic Principles as Practiced by the "Herald" in the "Gallop" Polls: A Report Prepared for the Meeting of East St Kilda Branch A.L.P.* 9 June 1942 .

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> NAA, *Letter from the Hobart Trades Hall Council to the Honourable the Prime Minister Mr J Curtin M.H.R.* 20 May 1942.

<sup>16</sup> NAA, *Letter from the Premiers Office Hobart from Robert Cosgrove to the Hon J. Curtin M.H.R., Prime Minister*, 9 July 1942.

<sup>17</sup> NAA, *Letter to the Premier of Tasmania Robert Cosgrove from the Prime Minister the Honourable J. Curtin M.H.R.*

<sup>18</sup> "It Happened in Parliament: Public Opinion on Loan," *The Canberra Times* Thursday 13 November 1941.

<sup>19</sup> Hadley Cantril, *The Human Dimension: Experiences in Policy Research*, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1967, p.41.

<sup>20</sup> Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War : Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq*, Chicago, Ill., London, University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade : Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany*, New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Jean M. Converse, *Survey Research in the United States : Roots and Emergence, 1890-1960* , Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

<sup>23</sup> Harry H. Gelber in his examination of Casey's role in the development of Australian Foreign Affairs explained 'His networking skills served him excellently at secondary and tertiary levels in influencing US public opinion, such as the media, Australian public servant could be asked, without business and private groups of all kinds.' Harry H. Gelber, 'Turning Points: Richard Casey and the Development of an Australian Foreign Service', *Quadrant*, vol. 53, no. 4, April 2009, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> W. J Hudson, " 'Casey, Richard Gavin Gardiner (1890–1976)'", National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/casey-richard-gavin-gardiner-9706/text17135> (accessed 12 January 2012).

<sup>25</sup> NAA, *Letter to the Minister of Information from R.G. Casey Australian Minister to the United States* May 6, 1940.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Leech, "'Bebarfald's'"

<http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/bebarfalds>.

<sup>28</sup> NAA, *Letter from G.M. Chambers Director of Bebarfald's Ltd to Right Honourable John Curtin Prime Minister of Australia* 5 February 1942

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Press: Digest Digested," *Time Magazine*, (Monday, May 23, 1938 ).

<sup>31</sup> Carroll J. Glynn, *Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

---

<sup>33</sup> At this stage Roy Morgan was polling approximately 2000 people per survey with a margin of error of 4 percent. This was the optimal figure to get an accurate result.

<sup>34</sup> NAA, *Letter to the Hon J. Curtin M.H.R., Prime Minister.*

<sup>35</sup> For a history of radio in Australia see: Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations : The Story of Australian Commercial Radio* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> NAA, Letter from Edward Beeby, Whitford's Broadcasting Network to the Right Honourable, the Prime Minister, 16th September 1942.

<sup>37</sup> NAA, *Letter from Prime Minister John Curtin to Edward Beeby Esquire Whitford's Broadcasting Network* 25 September 1942.

<sup>38</sup> NAA, "Letter from Roy Morgan to John Curtin," in *A1608 U57/1/1 War Section Public Opinion Polls* (21 December 1942).

<sup>39</sup> NAA, *Letter from Prime Ministers Department to Stuart Lucy* 21 January 1943. A1608, U57/1/1, War Section, Public Opinion Polls.

<sup>40</sup> Murray Goot and Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Reaching out or Going Down? The History of Tabloids* (University of Queensland, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Bridget Griffen-Foley, *The House of Packer : The Making of a Media Empire* (St Leonards, N.S.W., Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations : The Story of Australian Commercial Radio.*

<sup>43</sup> "Churchill on Critics: Ungainly Posture for Leaders," *West Australian* Wednesday October 1 1941.

<sup>44</sup> Sylvia Ashby and Stuart Lucy were married although for the purposes of their business Ashby retained her maiden name, hence the references in the police report to the Lucys.

<sup>45</sup> Intelligence Section General Staff.

<sup>46</sup> NAA, *File No 14396/253 Activities of Ashby Research Services Sydney* 27 August 1942

<sup>47</sup> NAA, *Letter from Deputy Director of Security (Queensland) to Director General of Security Canberra* 26 July 1943

<sup>48</sup> NAA, "Letter from Deputy Director of Security to Director General of Security," in *A9108, Australian Public Opinion Polls - 'HQ Miscellaneous Files' [Headquarters microfilm of Investigation Branch, Commonwealth Investigation Service and ASIO files]* (7 July 1943).

<sup>49</sup> NAA, "Report - Subject: Australian Public Opinion Polls (the Gallup Method)," in *A9108, Australian Public Opinion Polls - 'HQ Miscellaneous Files' [Headquarters microfilm of Investigation Branch, Commonwealth Investigation Service and ASIO files]* (8 July 1943).

<sup>50</sup> Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Sir Frank Packer : The Young Master : A Biography* (Sydney ; London: HarperBusiness, 2000).