

Wary of China, neglectful of Japan and warming to the US

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The Australian

14 October 2009

P. 14

It's time to put to bed old notions of an insular, parochial Australian public not much interested in international affairs.

Australians are interested in the outside world: each year about six million travel overseas, almost half have passports and a million Australians live abroad. And Australians' opinions about international affairs increasingly matter.

In recent years, the East Timor crisis and the Bali bombings showed just how passionate and engaged Australians have become about the world beyond our shores.

Arguably it has been public opinion that has led government and business on the need to act against climate change. And when Australians get angry about an international issue -- such as Schapelle Corby or whaling -- it can seriously constrain the government's ability to make policy.

Like citizens elsewhere, Australians increasingly expect their opinions and judgments to count, from reality television to customer surveys to opinion polls and debate "worms".

Public opinion is an important reality check for foreign policy makers, whose main contacts are with other governments and business. It ensures that there are stable and predictable limits outside of which policymakers will seldom stray.

Often the public's emotions can shape states' more generous impulses -- responding to famines or the effects of natural disasters -- or stiffen their meaner instincts, such as on asylum-seekers.

Public opinion also plays an important restraining role on the actions of the powerful. Overwhelmingly negative world opinion was the main influence on the more cautious foreign policy of George W. Bush's second term.

For these reasons, the Lowy Institute has conducted annual surveys of Australians' views about the outside world for the past five years. These polls provide a concrete riposte to the belief that Australians are uninformed and uninterested in international affairs. They also contain important messages for governments, in Canberra and in other countries.

On the whole, the Lowy polls have shown that Australians feel unthreatened by the world beyond our shores. With the exception of 2006, at least 90 per cent of Australians have said they felt safe or very safe when thinking about world events. It seems that Australians' general sense of security is remarkably at odds with the threat perception of our defence planners, who this year announced the greatest expansion in our defence forces since World War II.

Australians are also markedly sanguine about the global economy, considering we've just weathered the severest economic crisis since the Depression. About 86 per cent of the 1000 Australians polled said they were optimistic about Australia's economic performance during the next five years, the highest level of optimism since our polling began.

And each year since we started asking in 2006, more Australians have felt positive about globalisation; this year 79 per cent said globalisation was mostly good.

But five years of polling also show that Australians' opinions on important relationships have shifted. The 2005 Lowy poll caused alarm on both sides of the Pacific when only 58 per cent of Australians reported positive feelings about the US.

Feelings towards the US have warmed since and are now at a high point on our scale. By other measures too, Australians look positively on the US. This year, 83 per cent of Australians trusted the US somewhat or a great deal to act responsibly in the world (up 23 points since 2006) and 85 per cent said the alliance with the US was very or fairly important.

The immediate explanation is to credit the replacement of Bush with Barack Obama in the White House, but this may be too simplistic a reading. There appears to be a slow cooling in feelings towards China and an emerging division over the implications of its rise.

This year, 95 per cent of Australians polled said China already is or will become the leading power in Asia, but this group were almost evenly split between those who said they were comfortable about this and those who said they were uncomfortable.

When it came to Chinese investment there was a similar division, with 50 per cent of Australians saying the government was allowing too much Chinese investment and 42 per cent saying it was allowing about the right amount; just 3 per cent said the government wasn't allowing enough.

So, Australians' warming attitude towards our alliance with Washington may not just be about who is in the White House; changing power balances in our region could also be a factor.

The Lowy polls have also demonstrated that the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy should not be a one-way street, where the public opines and policy responds.

On some issues, Australians are remarkably astute. The Lowy poll asked where Australia sits in the rankings of international influence. More than half of those polled said Australia was not in the top 10, but somewhere in the top 20 of the world's most influential countries.

This judgment fits well with the available objective measures: we have the world's 15th largest economy, 12th largest defence budget and 13th largest aid budget.

But other public perceptions are curious. This year, only 6 per cent of Australians regarded Japan -- our largest trading partner and third-largest investor -- as more economically important to Australia than the US or China.

Indonesia's success as a democracy with a booming economy and a close diplomatic partner of Australia has not convinced more than half of those polled that it can be trusted to act responsibly in the world: 54 per cent of Australians said they trusted it "not at all" or "not very much". And Australians have remarkably lukewarm feelings towards South Korea, a fellow democracy and our third largest export market.

These results should serve as a warning to governments that poorly informed public opinion could become a threat to our diplomacy. Our relations with Indonesia, however close at the official level, are prey to inflamed public passions.

Consequently, Canberra neglects the need to communicate its foreign policy reasonings to the Australian public at its peril. We can no longer rest on complacent assumptions that the public isn't interested in international affairs.

And in holding a mirror to public opinion, Lowy Institute Polls will continue to contribute to building public engagement with the conduct of Australia's international policy.

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