

World Opinion Opposed the Attack on Afghanistan

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According to Tony Blair and George Bush respectively, 'world opinion' and the 'collective will of the world' supported the attack on Afghanistan. Yet analysis of international opinion polls shows that with only three exceptions majorities in all countries polled have opposed the policy of the US and UK governments. Furthermore there have been consistent majorities against the current action in the UK and sizeable numbers of the US population had reservations about the bombing.

World opinion

The biggest poll of world opinion was carried out by Gallup International in 37 countries in late September (Gallup International 2001). It found that apart from the US, Israel and India a majority of people in every country surveyed preferred extradition and trial of suspects to a US attack. Clear and sizeable majorities were recorded in the UK (75%) and across Western Europe from 67% in France to 87% in Switzerland. Between 64% (Czech Republic) and 83 % (Lithuania) of Eastern Europeans concurred as did varying majorities in Korea, Pakistan, South Africa and Zimbabwe. An even more emphatic answer obtained in Latin America where between 80% (Panama) and 94% (Mexico) favoured extradition. The poll also found that majorities in the US and Israel (both 56%) did not favour attacks on civilians. Yet such polls have been ignored by the media and by many of the polling companies. After the bombing started opposition seems to have grown in Europe. As only the Mirror has reported, by early November 65 per cent in Germany and 69 per cent in Spain wanted the US attacks to end (Yates, 2001). Meanwhile in Russia polls before and after the bombing show majorities opposed to the attacks. One slogan which reportedly commanded majority support doing the rounds in Moscow at the end of September was 'World War III - Without Russia' (Agency WPS 2001). After the bombing started Interfax reported a Gallup International poll showing a majority of Moscow residents against the US military action (BBC Worldwide Monitoring 2001)

Polling companies.

The questions asked by a number of polling companies such as MORI, Gallup and ICM have been seriously inadequate. They have failed to give respondents a range of possible options in relation to the war. When polling companies do ask about alternatives, support for war falls away quite markedly. In the UK prior to the bombing all except one poll, which asked the question, showed a majority against bombing if it caused civilian casualties. After the bombing started UK polling companies stopped asking about concern for civilians. From the start of the bombing to the fall of Kabul on 13 November there were only four polls on British opinion (by ICM (2001a, 2001b) and MORI (2001a, 2001b)) compared with 7 between the 11 September and the start of the bombing on October 7. None has asked adequate questions about alternatives to bombing. ICM did ask one alternative questions about whether bombing should stop to allow aid into Afghanistan and 54% said it should (Guardian October 30). Where questions about aid or alternatives to bombing are asked the results have been consistent: Clear and sometimes massive majorities against the bombing. In an ignored poll, the Scottish Sunday Mail found that fully 69% of Scots favoured sanctions, diplomacy or bringing Bin Laden to trial. Only 17% favoured his execution and a minuscule 5% supported bombing (21 October). The Herald in Glasgow also found only 6% favoured the then current policy of bombing alone (3

November). It is well known that Scottish opinion tends to be to the left of UK opinion, but not by more than a few points on average. Although the Press Association picked up on the Herald poll it was not reported in the British national press. Between the start of the bombing and the fall of Kabul, (with the exception of the single question in the Guardian poll showing 54% in favour of a pause in bombing) not a single polling company asked the British public any questions about alternatives to war.

It is not altogether clear whether the lack of options given to poll respondents is due to the media or the polling companies. Certainly both UK and US polling companies have been guilty of misrepresenting their own data almost without exception overemphasising support for the war. For example Mori claimed that their polling in late October had 'extinguished any lingering doubt' that support was 'fading' (Mortimore 2001). Of course this completely ignores all the poll data which would give an alternative view and the fact that the polling questions have been inadequate. Furthermore, according to Bob Worcester of MORI, (in an address to an London School of Economics meeting on the media and the war on 15 November) the text of press reports on their polls are 'approved' by MORI itself before they are published. This is clearly a matter of good practice and should be applauded. But the benefit is fairly marginal, if MORI are content for the press to distort the level of opposition by concentrating on the 'overwhelming' support for the war and relegating opposition to the war to the end of reports.

Media reporting

It comes as a surprise to many in the UK and US to discover that opinion is so markedly opposed to or ambivalent about the current action. One key reason is that the polls have been systematically misreported in the media. Both television and the press in the US and UK have continued to insist that massive majorities support the bombing. Senior BBC journalists have expressed surprise and disbelief when shown the evidence from the opinion polls. One told me that she didn't believe that the polling companies were corrupt and that she thought it unlikely that the Guardian would minimise the opposition to the war. This was days after the Guardian published a poll purporting to show that 74% supported the bombing (Travis 2001, 12 October). What the BBC journalist hadn't noticed was that the Guardian's polls had asked only very limited questions and failed to give respondents the option of saying they would prefer diplomatic solutions. In the poll on 12 October one question was asked but only if people thought enough had been done diplomatically. Given that the government and the media had been of the opinion that enough had been done and alternative voices were marginalised, it is surprising that as many as 37% said that enough had not been done.

Furthermore the Guardian's editorial position has offered (qualified) support for the war and it did not cover the demonstrations in London and Glasgow on 13 October. As a result of a 'flurry' of protests this was raised by the readers' editor at the Guardian's editorial meeting on 14 October and the editor agreed that this had been a 'mistake'. But, the readers editor revealed that it is the papers 'general policy' not to cover marches (Mayes 2001), thus condemning dissent to the margins of the news agenda and leaving the field open for those with the resources to stage 'proper' news events.

Elsewhere in the media, almost every poll has been interpreted to indicate popular support for the war. Where that interpretation is extremely difficult journalists have tried to squeeze the figures to fit. One Scottish newspaper was so concerned at the low numbers supporting bombing that they phoned me to ask how best to interpret the findings. Another paper, the Sunday Mail showed only 5% support for bombing and 69% favouring conflict resolution. Nevertheless the closest they got to this in their headline was that Scots were 'split' on bombing (21 October 2001).

TV news reporters have routinely covered demonstrations in Britain and the US as if they represent only a small minority of opinion. The underlying assumption is that demonstrators only represent themselves rather than seeing them as an expression of a larger constituency of dissent. Thus BBC reporters claim that 'the opinion polls say that a majority of UK public opinion backs the war' (BBC1 Panorama, 14 October 2001) or in reporting the demonstrations in London that 'Despite the strength of feelings here today those opposed to military action are still very much in the minority' (BBC1 News 13 October 2001 21.50). These reports are at best naïve, at worst mendacious, and a clear violation of the legal requirement of the BBC to be balanced.

In the US dissent has been markedly harder to find in the news media (Solomon 2001). The pictures of dead children featured in the rest of the world press been hard to find (Lucas 2001) and the debate on the use of cluster bombs and the 'daisy cutter' bombs (a weapon of mass destruction) which were debated in the mainstream UK media in late October were almost non-existent on the television news in the US. * CNN continued to report under the heading 'America Strikes back' which is of itself a woefully partial version of what was happening. Polling companies in the US have given their respondents little choice of policy options. Where they have asked a variety of questions answers opposing US policy have been downplayed in media reports. The New York Times reported on 25 September that 92% of respondents agreed that the US should take military action against whoever is responsible for the attacks'. But the text of the report belied the 'support for war' headline indicating that fully 78% felt that the US should wait until it was certain who is responsible', before responding. As Edward Herman, leading critic of US foreign Policy has written of the inadequacy of polls which do not ask about extradition, civilian casualties, or whether they would support action which breaches international law (Herman 2001). One little reported poll for Newsweek in early October showed that '58 percent of respondents said the U.S. government's support for Israel may have been the cause' of the attacks, thus indicating that America may have struck first rather than simply striking back as CNN would have it.

Furthermore there is evidence that dissent in the US is being underrepresented in responses to opinion polls. In a Gallup poll 31% agreed that the attacks on the US had made them 'less likely to say things that might be unpopular?' (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr011008c.asp>). And opposition to the war is pretty unpopular in media coverage of the war. When Bill Maher, host of the Politically Incorrect chat show criticised remarks by Bush describing the WTC attackers as 'cowards', the White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said: 'There are reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they do, and this is not a time for remarks like that' (Usborne 2001). His show lost advertisers and was dropped by some networks.

Conclusion

The most fundamental problem with the polls is that they assume the public has perfect information. But, notwithstanding some dissent in the press, the media in the UK, and even more emphatically in the US, have been distorting what is happening in Afghanistan especially on civilian casualties and alternatives to war. To ask about approval of what is happening assumes that people actually know what is happening. But given that a large proportion of the population receives little but misinformation and propaganda (especially on TV news which is most peoples main source of information) then it is less surprising that some should approve of what they are told is happening - that the US and UK are doing their best to avoid civilian casualties, that Blair exercises a moderating influence on Bush. When they are asked their own preferences about what should happen (rather than approval questions about what is happening) then there is much less support, even in the

US. In other words there is no world support for the attack on Afghanistan and public opinion in the US and UK is at best dubious and at worst flatly opposed to what is happening. If Bush and Blair were really democrats, they would never have started the bombing.

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*Author's observation. The author spent 10 days in the US between 26th October and 4th November and compared the news in the US with the debates taking place in the media in the UK.

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