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The Public Debate

Public opinion is the summation of all the influences previously described and polls suggest that, while British people are unfamiliar with the theories of armchair strategists or of military leaders, they usually take a balanced, commonsensical view of intervention because of the ways their ideas have been shaped by their own experiences and their history.¹ It is also clear that popular British attitudes have been far more cautious than intellectuals have allowed.

At the start of the 20th century, democracy was a novelty and the effects of the growth in the electorate were still unclear. The educated middle class was suspicious and contemptuous of the influence of ordinary citizens on foreign policy. Commentators imagined that the 'masses', unlike educated people, were rabid and xenophobic interventionists. Opinion polls, which began in the late 1930s, should have eradicated these prejudices but they persist out of ignorance, and because they flatter the chattering classes. Polls have shown, first, that the gap between the knowledge of international affairs amongst educated and less-educated people is nowadays less than many had supposed because everyone has to filter vast quantities of information and all tend only to memorise matters which consciously or unconsciously they believe are important to them.² Secondly, polls make clear that it is the most highly educated, broadsheet reading, non-specialists who are likely to be 'swept away' by the urge to intervene.

The Liberal economist and writer J. A. Hobson gave classic expression to middle class views in *The Psychology of Jingoism* published in 1901. His

book was a reaction to the passions unleashed by the Boer War and his attack focused on the music-halls where:

The artiste conveys by song or recitation crude notions upon morals and politics, appealing by coarse humour or exaggerated pathos to the animal lusts of an audience stimulated by alcohol into appreciative hilarity.³

The music-hall song, the popular art of the time, spread jingoism from the cities into the countryside. Minimal education had created 'a large population, singularly destitute of intellectual curiosity, and with a low valuation for things of the mind' who were capable of reading the popular press but without discriminating between the true and the false. While Hobson's worst fears were inspired by what he believed were working-class attitudes, he quoted examples from *The Standard* and other more serious newspapers to show the level of hatred excited even amongst the educated against the Afrikaners.⁴

The emotional crowds in London, Berlin, Vienna and other capitals rejoicing over the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 confirmed Hobson's views, leading later analysts, such as Caroline Playne, to write of the neuroses sweeping West European people and impelling statesmen into the conflict.⁵ However, as we saw in the last chapter, most of those who spoke in Parliament did not share that view of the popularity of war. Of course, it may be said that those claiming the public were opposed to Britain's entry into the conflict, were themselves of that view. But their appraisal of public opinion on the outbreak of war was not contested in Parliament, even if the young demonstrators in the capital were making themselves conspicuous. As Lloyd George wrote:

The youth of the rival countries were howling for war. I shall never forget the warlike crowds that thronged Whitehall and poured into Downing Street, whilst the cabinet were deliberating on the alternative of peace or war. On Sunday there was a great crowd. Monday was a bank holiday and multitudes of young people concentrated in Westminster demonstrating for war against Germany.⁶

How do we reconcile the different manifestations of public opinion? Whatever may have been the situation in the large cities across Europe,

there is plenty of evidence that rural people recoiled at the idea of conflict. One highly experienced British diplomat was in Normandy when war broke out. He wrote later:

I shall never forget that sight. Sobbing and weeping women everywhere; the older men, who remembered 1870 and knew what this mobilisation meant, endeavouring to master their emotion and to keep up the appearance of calm; the younger men, who were to be thrust into the furnace, standing dazed and anxious-eyed at the prospect of the unknown tomorrow which they were to face.... I shall remember the weeping women... and the two sharp strokes of the tocsin, sounding the knell of hope.⁷

When opinion polls were developed decades later, they would confirm the hypothesis that the older, more rural and less-educated people were more reluctant to be involved in war than the urban young. Amongst the elite, including the leading clergymen discussed earlier, many were deeply shocked by the invasion of Belgium and they would have regarded it as utterly disloyal to do anything which undermined the armed forces. Liberal party members were in the same position as Labour supporters after the attack on Iraq in 2003 or Democrats in the United States during the early years of the Vietnam War; while their instincts might have inclined them to oppose the war, they were influenced by loyalty to their party while it was in power as well as loyalty to the country.

As the demonstrations and the intellectuals' enthusiasm for war were so well publicised, this strengthened the conventional wisdom in the inter-war period that the onset of war had been popular across Europe in 1914 and, after 1917, in the United States. It was, no doubt, this feeling that helped to inspire Walter Lippmann to publish his classic study of *Public Opinion* in 1922. Although he expressed his fears in more academic and guarded language, Lippmann shared Hobson's concerns about democracy in general and the press in particular. He believed that government censorship and false newspaper accounts gave the mass of people bogus ideas about policy and distorted their views of foreign countries. The situation could be improved by the development of political science departments in universities and the establishment of intelligence services within government which should study and report on international affairs without their views being distorted by the administration.⁸

If it was the general view that crowds had pushed for war in 1914, it was equally widely assumed in the inter-war years that the British and American publics as a whole had swung round and would oppose war at almost any price, hence the policy of appeasement. Modern polls have shown that public opinion is far more stable than was believed at the time. Before the invention of such polls politicians relied on newspapers, chance encounters and demonstrations to assess opinion, but we now know how distorting these can be; newspaper editors, commentators and demonstrators want to influence opinion, they are not representative of it. Chance encounters can be equally misleading, one historian quoted the reaction of two navvies overheard at Waterloo station complaining that their newspaper was full of the resignation of the Foreign Secretary in February 1938 rather than of a football match, to prove that the working class was indifferent to politics.⁹ It proved nothing of the sort, though no doubt it appealed to the lip curling prejudices of the elite.

If they can be believed, because their methods were very much cruder than their modern equivalents and left out those who expressed no opinion, the earliest opinion polls, organised by the British Institute of Public Opinion in 1937, tell a different story. The majority stochastically accepted that the aggression of the Axis powers was making war inevitable.¹⁰ Children recognise the playground bully and the ways of dealing with him. That experience remains with us for the rest of our lives, though it is overlaid amongst the educated by sophisticated (and unfortunately sometimes unrealistic) ideas of appeasement, arbitration and conflict management. International affairs were full of braggarts and bullies in the 1930s. Ordinary people, who spent part of Saturday night watching newsreels at the Gaumont or Odeon of the Nuremberg rallies, the Nazis' attacks on the Jews, Fascist bombing raids on Spanish cities and Japanese raids on Chinese ones, knew very well what such events portended, and how the bullies would have to be dealt with.

People still clutched at anything which offered the slimmest chance of peace, but they wanted the government to prepare for failure. Even in 1937, when Hitler had already swallowed the Rhineland and Austria and was making ready to take over Czechoslovakia, 52 per cent of those responding apparently told pollsters that they wanted a disarmament conference. However, the same polls seemed to show that respondents believed a European war would involve Britain (83 per cent), that Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy was failing (58 per cent) and that Britain should increase its defence spending (75 per cent).¹¹ If this really

was the public verdict, it was balanced and shrewd; but what is striking is that the general public would appear to have been more sensible than the government or many of the intellectuals. Britain's leaders were still hoping to follow a policy of limited liability in Europe and intellectuals were still to be found who argued that British rearmament would bring wars closer.¹² Of course, there were anomalies in popular opinion; despite their robust stance, many people were against conscription (75 per cent of those responding), a majority (62 per cent) said they would not volunteer to join the armed forces and 78 per cent of women said they would not urge their husbands to volunteer. People did not want to become warriors, they did not want to be involved or to involve their family members in a conflict, which would bring enemy bombers over British cities, but they believed war was coming and by July 1939, 76 per cent of those responding were in favour of Britain fighting to help the Poles if the Germans attacked Danzig, thus confirming the importance of moral commitments.¹³ On one point alone were they wildly optimistic; when war broke out in September 1939, 82 per cent expected Britain to win, a supposition which proved in the end correct but which now appears panglossian, given the threats which Britain faced.¹⁴

Despite the historian's view quoted above of the indifference of the working class to politics, by March 1938, 72 per cent of those responding seemed to believe that the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden was justified in resigning over Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. Yet, in all wars there is a tendency for the public to rally round the leader's policy and, after the war had begun, polls showed for a while that 64 per cent of the respondents supported Chamberlain's government and only 27 per cent opposed it. But this support was conditional; when the Nazis overran Norway in 1940 and the government appeared to be pursuing the war half-heartedly, support dropped to 33 per cent, and 57 per cent believed that the government had not done enough to save the Norwegians.¹⁵ Chamberlain fell because he lost the backing of Parliament, but the public apparently agreed with his removal from office. Subsequently, Churchill's premiership seemed to have the backing of over 80 per cent of the population, even though approval of the government hovered around the 50 per cent level. Again this might seem anomalous since the government's strategic mistakes were very largely Churchill's, but, with the advantages of hindsight, we can see that the public were justified; they blamed the government for its collective mistakes while recognising that Churchill was by far the best leader available. Asked in March 1941 who should replace the Prime Minister, if anything

happened to him, 37 per cent said Eden and 1 per cent said Clement Attlee. Later experience was to suggest that Attlee lacked the rhetorical powers necessary and Eden the balance and toughness of mind.¹⁶

And so the public came later to believe. In February 1951 some eight months after the Korean war broke out, despite the natural tendency for people to rally round the government, 47 per cent disapproved of Attlee as Prime Minister and only 44 per cent supported him. When Churchill replaced him, the percentage supporting the government rose immediately to 55 per cent; there was no longer the need to idolise him as they had in the Second World War, but he was regarded as a better war leader than his Labour counterpart. Gallup polls appeared to suggest that the public's attitude to the Korean War was cautiously interventionist; in October 1950, 63 per cent supported the Labour government's decision to send troops, but, after the defeat of the UN forces in the winter of 1950, only 28 per cent believed that the US commander of the UN forces General MacArthur was doing a good job and only 10 per cent were in favour of widening the war by attacking China as MacArthur suggested.¹⁷

Six years later, the Suez Crisis broke out with Colonel Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal. Polls showed that the great majority (68 per cent to 14 per cent) believed that the Egyptians were not justified in taking this action, but only 33 per cent said that they were in favour of military measures to rectify the situation against 47 per cent who believed that political and economic pressure was all that should be tried. Asked retrospectively whether Britain and France should have acted as soon as Nasser moved to nationalise the vital waterway, only 22 per cent believed that this would have been justified, though 69 per cent thought it was reasonable to take military precautions.¹⁸ Once again, these verdicts seem far from absurd; Nasser was in the wrong in the popular view, pressure should be brought to bear on him to reverse his policy and military precautions ought to be taken, but force was undesirable. Of course, we know from subsequent experience with Cuba, Iraq and elsewhere that economic pressure would have stiffened Nasser's resistance, rather than forced him to disgorge the canal, and Anglo-French criticism of the canal's nationalisation now seems an archaic throwback to the imperialist past. But, given this attitude and the information available at the time, it was not unreasonable to try economic pressure and this would have been less risky than the policy chosen by the government.

During the Falklands War there was a revival of the fears of popular jingoism expressed by Hobson and other Liberals in the early 20th century. The economic historian E. P. Thompson claimed that:

The Falklands War has shown us at least this – how close to the surface of our even-tempered life the atavistic moods of violence lie. We shall pay for it for a long time, in increases of muggings in our cities, in international ill will . . . War in the Falklands will be a general license to disorder.¹⁹

Such fears seem exaggerated, and it is difficult to prove that either international ill will or muggings increased as a consequence. No doubt, there was general resentment about being pushed around by Latin American dictators and it is true that the public ‘rallied round the flag’. Nearly two weeks after the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands, 34 per cent of the population supported Labour and 33 per cent backed the Tories, while 58 per cent expressed dissatisfaction with the way the government was running the country. This was hardly unreasonable since the economy was in the doldrums and the government had failed to deter the Argentine attack. Support for the government climbed steadily as the task force approached the islands and war began. By 21–23 June, it had risen to 51 per cent against 24 per cent for Labour and 23 per cent for the Liberals. By then 84 per cent expressed satisfaction with the way the government was handling the crisis.²⁰

The public were not, however, in favour of extreme measures and did not share the jingoism of some of the popular media. Sixty-eight per cent objected to interning Argentine citizens in Britain, 93 per cent opposed the use of nuclear weapons, between 57 and 63 per cent opposed bombing Argentine bases and 73 per cent rejected an invasion of Argentina. Eighty-five per cent supported the deployment of the task force to the South Atlantic but the public were much more cautious about the loss of lives; at the beginning of May less than half believed that the lives of Falklands Islanders should be sacrificed, though the number who believed that the issue justified the sacrifice of servicemen’s lives grew from 44 to 62 per cent. A bare majority 46 against 44 per cent believed that the decision to sink the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano* with the loss of 368 Argentines was justified.²¹ Some of these opinions were contradictory, it was inevitable that the servicemen’s lives would be sacrificed if war began, yet some plainly supported the war while denying the corollary. But such contradictions reflected the hopes, rather than expectations, that humanity could be reconciled with defending British territory.

Much of the most extensive polling data we have about public attitudes towards warfare comes from the United States and some of the conclusions which can be drawn from this fit with what we know of

British opinion. John Mueller used this data in his study of war and public opinion to demonstrate that party supporters often back a war if it is their party which is in power. But these loyalties are cut across by age, education and sex. Support for war drops with age, which confirms what has been said above about events in 1914; 82 per cent of the Americans under 30 were in favour of involvement in the Korean war in July 1950 against 71 per cent of those over 49s; similarly, 61 per cent of the Americans under 30s were in favour of involvement in Vietnam in May 1965 against 43 per cent of those of 49; by May 1971 the corresponding figures were 34 and 23 per cent. In May 1965, 68 per cent of the college-educated were in favour of the war against 36 per cent of those who had only been to grade school; by May 1971 the figures had dropped to 31 and 21 per cent. Poll data shows that women tend to be more reluctant to use force than men. The figures would suggest that, contrary to widespread opinion, if one ignores the impact of party loyalty, the most hawkish are the young, college-educated males and the most dovish the least educated, elderly women.²² Again, contrary to prejudice, attitudes amongst the elite are also the most volatile, while, paradoxically, 'ordinary citizens hold coherent attitude structures because they lack detailed knowledge about foreign policy'.²³

Recent studies have focused less on the background of respondents to polls and more on the general international situation, the justification for war and the prospects of success.²⁴ However, the two approaches are complementary; younger people tend to be more idealistic, more incensed by perceived wrongs and more optimistic about the prospects for change. Older people will have lived through previous wars, seen hopes dashed and interventions bogged down until their original objectives were forgotten or discredited. Many will also have spent 20 years protecting their children from the lesser dangers of childhood, only to see them suddenly threatened with involvement in all the horrors of warfare. Similarly, highly educated people will be the most aware of the sufferings of foreign people, as in Bosnia in the 1990s or in Zimbabwe in 2008, thus they will tend to be more interventionist than those who are less interested in politics. They will also change their views more readily, turning against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s or against Iraq and Afghanistan more recently, when they learnt from the media of the suffering the wars unleashed.

Both national leaders and commentators simplify the issues involved in a threatened conflict and stress just one aspect of the complex political and strategic picture. Ministers also exaggerate the choice presented to foreign leaders and minimise their own.²⁵ In August 1914 the

Austro-Hungarian government emphasised the threat to its Empire from Serbian nationalism and, because of this threat, it was prepared to risk a European conflagration. For the German government and people the issue was wider; it was a matter of honour and strategic necessity to stand by Austria-Hungary, its only reliable ally. Berlin also feared the growing power of Russia and wanted to break out of the 'encirclement' of the Franco-Russian alliance. In the British public debate, Germany's breach of Belgium's neutrality predominated, but the political elite were also concerned with the commitment to France and the threat to the balance of power if the Entente were defeated. So it is with each impending conflict, each side stressing very different factors and issues. Before their attack on Iraq in March 2003, the US and British governments emphasised the menace to international security from Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and the horrors Saddam Hussain had perpetrated. The Iraqi government felt the need to convince its people and other Arab states that it would not bow to the 'imperialists' and maybe it hoped that they would draw back in the end from launching an attack. The chattering classes responded to the views of the columnists and to ministers' speeches, the wider public brought their previous experience and common sense to bear on the problem, the experts expanded the debates beyond the limits to which ministers and the more interventionist columnists wanted it confined; Bloch and Angell warned governments before 1914 that the greatest threat to their stability came from the economic impact of war itself, similarly some regional specialists alerted the US and British governments in 2003 to the dangers of exacerbating relations between the Islamic World and the West, and undermining the stability of those Arab governments which had supported the West in the past. After the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic made belligerent speeches about Russian behaviour, while some of the experts on international relations warned of the dangers involved and explained the reasons for Russian policy.²⁶

The wider public may not have read the warnings of the specialists, but they were not taken in by governmental arguments when they seemed to defy common sense. When the Conservative government continued to argue that Hitler could be appeased and relied upon to stand by agreements in 1938, the primitive polling methods of the time appeared to show that people thought it had lost touch with reality. When the Labour government joined with the United States in attacking the Taleban in Afghanistan in October 2001, the government had the support of 69 per cent of the British population, presumably because

they were deeply moved by the film of helpless civilians caught in the Twin Towers on 9/11 and saw this as a just and defensive war. But they had no illusions; despite frequent government protestations, they were rightly convinced that these attacks would make terrorist incidents in Britain more likely. Fifty-nine per cent said this was the case and only 3 per cent accepted the claims by the British and US governments that it would have the reverse effect. Sixty-three per cent said they were either very or fairly worried about terrorist aggression, and only 19 per cent expressed 'great' confidence in the ability of the government to protect them.²⁷ That this public assessment was shrewder than the government's was demonstrated when British-born Islamists outraged by Western military actions placed bombs on the London underground in July 2005.

It seems fair to conclude that before a war breaks out the public are far more balanced and less gullible than commentators are given to suggesting and governments appear to believe. Indeed, before the Second World War, during the Suez Crisis in 1956, before the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and the attack on Iraq in 2003, they were, as suggested above, shrewder than those who made foreign policy. If this is the case, personal experience will have been most important for the less educated. But all will have been affected to some extent by education, films, novels, arguments between commentators, institutions and pressure groups, discussions in Parliament and in the media. Of course, some point out that the consistency of public opinion is not always a virtue; reconciliation with Germany was reasonable in the 1920s,²⁸ it was impossible when the Nazis came to power; similarly the international system changed completely after the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁹ But the public were aware of these changes and their responses were reasonable enough.

The treatment of the electorate by politicians and the assessment by journalists fails to reflect the common sense of the majority as shown by the mass of polling data. The irony is that governments fear public opinion less than they did in the 1930s. They know that the general public will initially back them once war has broken out and thus they feel able to intervene in what they hope will be a short war.³⁰