

JOHN HOWARD

PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY

POLICY PERSPECTIVES

‘DEAR JOHN....’: LETTERS FROM THE PUBLIC TO PRIME MINISTER HOWARD

**DANIEL CASEY, PHD CANDIDATE, ANU
SCHOOL OF POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AUGUST 2022**



UNSW
CANBERRA

**John Howard Prime
Ministerial Library**

JOHN HOWARD

PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY

POLICY PERSPECTIVES



Daniel Casey,
PhD candidate, ANU

Daniel Casey is a PhD candidate at the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University. His research focuses on responsiveness of political elites to public opinion and how the political and public agenda are set. He is studying this by examining the letters of members of the public to Prime Minister Howard. Prior to academia, Daniel had an extensive career in the Australian Public Service, working across central and social policy agencies, where he worked on the establishment of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and the rollout of digital television. He has also worked for Members of Parliament and peak non-government organisations, where he was responsible for developing policy submissions to government.

‘DEAR JOHN....’: LETTERS FROM THE PUBLIC TO PRIME MINISTER HOWARD

The John Howard Prime Ministerial Library

The Howard Library was established by UNSW Canberra in 2018. It works to improve public leadership and policy in Australia by:

- preserving and making accessible the papers of The Honourable John Howard, OM, AC, Australia's 25th prime minister, and the papers of Howard Government ministers;
- advancing research in, and informing debate about, public leadership and policy;
- curating exhibitions that introduce Australians to leadership and policy challenges in a balanced and non-partisan way through the experiences of the Howard Government (1996-2007); and
- contributing to the civic education of all Australians.

The Howard Library curates a permanent Exhibition at Old Parliament House in Canberra, and has a Reading Room at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) Library.

Policy Perspectives

Policy Perspectives is a series of occasional papers published by the Howard Library which aims to critically reflect on policy decisions of the Howard Government in order to provide context and perspective for contemporary policy debates, and facilitate discussion among the policy community and the broader Australian public.

Disclaimer

The opinions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Howard Library or the institutions to which the authors are attached.

Executive editor

Inquiries about *Policy Perspectives* may be directed to the Executive Editor, Andrew Blyth (email: a.blyth@adfa.edu.au)

ISSN 2653-133X (Online)

Introduction

Australians have always written to their prime ministers in the hope of being heard and making a difference. This was also a feature of the Howard prime ministership even though this era saw a transition from letters to emails. For some, a letter is a chance to let off steam; for others, a chance to provide sage political advice.

I write to you in utter disgust at the way politicians are behaving today. As a former strong Liberal/National supporter I have now abandoned your Party – a thing I never thought would happen... You will probably dismiss this letter and continue to insult the electors calling them all sorts of names and go the way of Paul Keating. We voters out here are not stupid. (NAA: M4898, 1)

Such sentiments were not rare. Did Mr Howard dismiss such letters or were they a key source of public opinion? What did people write to Mr Howard about and did it have an appreciable effect on policy? This paper uses these letters to provide an avenue not normally explored into the public opinion of the first 5 years of the Howard Government, by examining what issues were of sufficient concern to voters to pick up a pen and write. The language of the letters also reveals how citizens sought to engage with their political leaders. It shows that people felt they had a fundamental right to engage directly with their leader, and an expectation of a response.

This paper draws from three sources, first extensive archival research; second, an analysis of the media transcripts of Mr Howard when he was prime minister (Sherratt, 2019) and, finally, interviews with Mr Howard, and key members of his staff, to draw out details about how Mr Howard and his office viewed and engaged with these letters.

Democracy requires clear linkages between the public and their representatives, with the latter charged with appropriately implementing and reflecting the views of the former. This necessitates both that the public speak, and those politicians listen. The media are usually focused on opinion polls; however politicians listen to the public in a variety of different ways, beyond opinion polls. For individuals, with often limited access to their political leaders, letters are a core way for them to express their opinion to their leaders, and a key way for politicians to understand the public mood (Broockman and Skovron (2018); Hooghe and Marien (2012); Lee (2002) and Powlick (1995)).

This paper will first provide a short contextual overview of letters from the weak to the powerful (such as a prime minister), a sub-genre that has sometimes been called 'writing-up' (Lyons, 2015). It then discusses in detail the contents of Mr Howard's mailbag, as well as how he and his office engaged with these letters.



Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A463, 1986/2685

Letters to Leaders

Australians have been writing to our political leaders for as long as our Archives have records — from letters to Prime Minister Barton, our first ‘Federal Premier’ (as many writers called him) to letters to Prime Minister Hawke providing some home —drawn cartoons to ‘cheer your day’ (NAA: M3596, 149). Until now, there has not been any systematic study of these letters. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet’s (PM&C) first annual report in 1979, provided the first detailed information on the volume of correspondence, and PM&C’s role. In 1978–79, around 65,000 letters were sent to Prime Minister Fraser, around 45 letters per 10,000 people. Since then, the number of letters per 10,000 people has fluctuated between approximately 50 and 100. Interestingly, there does not appear to be any noticeable increase with the introduction of email¹ in 2000.

It is still too early to determine whether social media will lead to a change in the volume of correspondence to the prime minister.

Over Mr Howard’s full term, the average volume of letters per 10,000 people is roughly similar to other prime ministers, as Figure 1 shows. There is no statistically significant difference between Labor and Coalition prime ministers, or between election years and non-election years, or early in a prime minister’s term and later in that term. It is worth noting that since Prime Minister Abbott, there does appear to be a reduction in the number of letters. However, it is still too early to say whether this trend will continue.

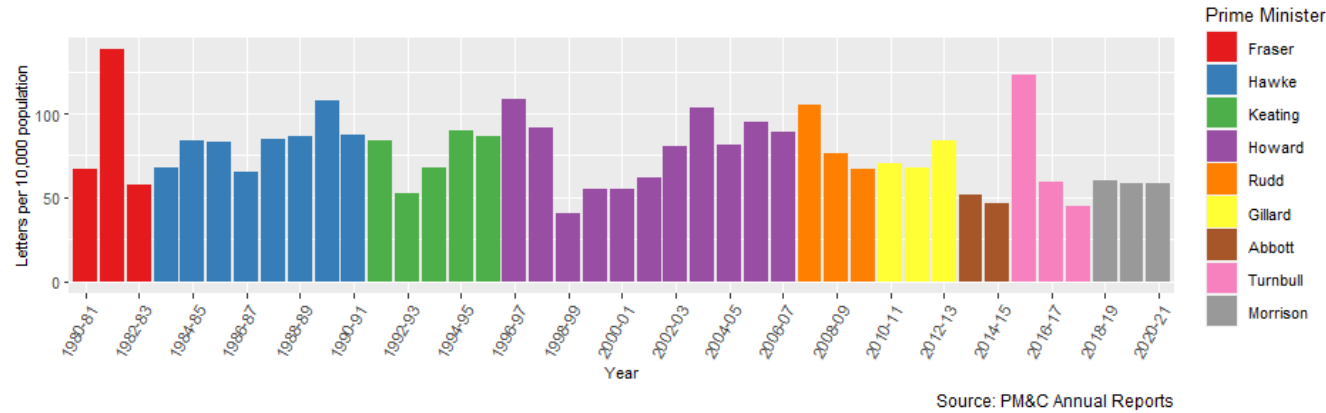


Figure 1: Annual Volume of Letters Per 10,000 Population — By prime minister

¹ These figures do include emails to the prime minister, but not comments on social media.

Prime Minister Howard and public opinion

Like all politicians, Mr Howard had to balance competing demands between being responsive to public opinion and pursuing their individual or party’s policy positions. Some commentators suggest Mr Howard’s success was based on ‘finding the right balance between ideology and pragmatism’ (Van Onselen & Errington, 2008). Whatever that balance was, it relied on Mr Howard having a thorough understanding of public opinion. This section will briefly consider the different channels of public opinion Mr Howard used, before turning specifically to letters from members of the public.

While opinion polls are often regarded as the primary means for understanding public opinion, there are significant limitations on what opinion polls can tell us. Pollsters predetermine the timing and topics that are asked about. Niche topics are rarely the subject of opinion polls, even though they may be the most important issue for a key demographic. Polls struggle to show political leaders how much someone knows, or cares, about the topic. Therefore, politicians often turn to other channels of public opinion, that can often be more useful than traditional opinion polls – like their mailbag, letters to the editor, talkback radio, or talking to people in the street. Mr Howard noted that he used his correspondence as one way (of many) to tap into public opinion. He said:

Personal interaction, with a cross-section of friends... Following the media, carefully. Media is still a good communicator of public opinion... Over a period of time the volume of correspondence can have an impact. (Interview with Mr Howard).

During his term in office, he reflected that:

The revolution in communications represented by email has also led to a vast increase in direct contact by constituents. This is a positive and healthy development. Elected representatives should canvass views and take advice from as wide a range of legitimate community sources as possible. (Transcript 12325, 19 June 2001).

Stephen Brady, who was a Senior Advisor in Mr Howard’s office between 1996 and 1998, and then again between 2003 and 2004, similarly reflected that Mr Howard’s public opinion radar was ‘sort of permanently on’:

It was direct and it was osmosis... That was the space that he most needed to be in. Collecting opinion – cabinet colleagues, backbench, public in different ways. (Interview with Mr Brady).

Prime Minister Howard's mailbag

Each fortnight, Mr Howard received a brief from PM&C setting out the total amount of mail received in the previous fortnight, as well as highlighting topics where he had received at least 30 items of correspondence. This appears to have been standard practice, with similar briefs located for Mr Hawke. The briefs are in the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and I located 69 of these briefs across the period March 1996 to December 2000.

Types of mail

Mr Howard's mailbag from the public can broadly be separated into three categories:

- 1. Letters on a policy issue;
- 1. Pro-forma/template letters on a policy issue; and
- 1. Other letters, mainly individualised letters – asking for help/assistance/information.

As can be seen in Figure 2 below, the 'Other letters' category, which represents around 45 per cent of the total mail, is reasonably stable across this period (with a notable exception in 1999 due to East Timor, and congratulatory messages after each election). The major driver in variation across fortnights are the pro-formas, which can vary from low hundreds to 10,000 per fortnight. Overall, these represent almost 48 per cent of the total letters. The number of topic-letters is consistently low (once again, with a notable exception in 1999 due to East Timor) and represent around 7 per cent of the total letters. The following sections explore these three types of letters.

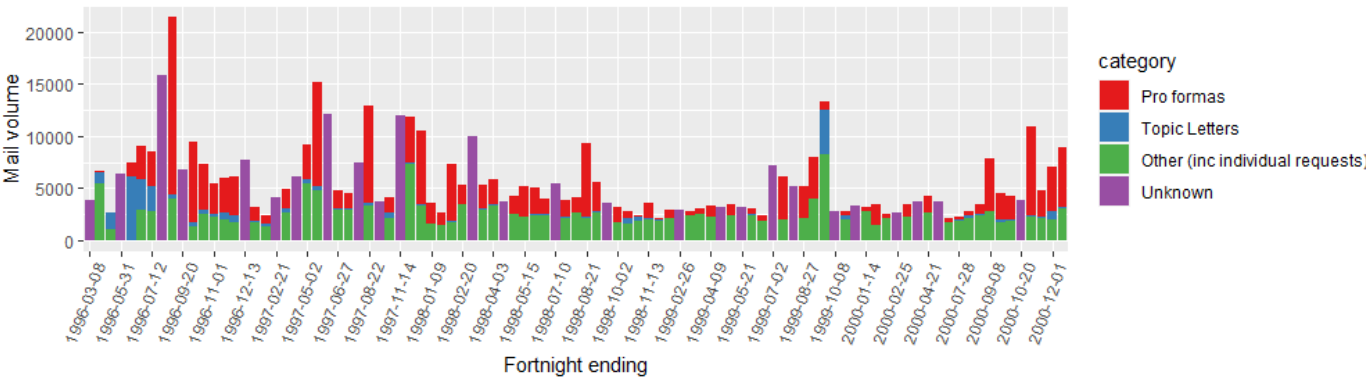


Figure 2: Mail volume by fortnight — by type of mail

Note: The unknown category is where the volume has been derived from other briefs, so the breakdown is unknown.

Pro-forma or campaign letters on a policy issue

In 'pro-forma' letters, the exact same text is sent by multiple people. These were organised by interest groups, such as the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association of Australia (AOPA), who called on their members to fax the prime minister about appointments to the board of the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) (see Figure 3, below). The prime minister received more than 500 of these letters and faxes within a month – however it appears that they were largely ignored by the prime minister's office – one memo on this campaign says 'no action [was] taken by the PMO to monitor the fax numbers, or respond to the faxes' (NAA: M4326, 215), which were simply forwarded to the relevant department.

While these represented almost half of Mr Howard's mailbag, I was unable to find an instance where Mr Howard saw, or responded, to one of these campaigns. This is reflected in the *Ministerial Correspondence Procedures Handbook*, which was thoroughly revised soon after Mr Howard came

to office, which set out the procedures for dealing with these campaign letters. Where the organisation running the campaign can be identified, the organisation received a substantive reply, but it appears that each letter-writer did not get a response. Mr Howard noted that 'I paid some regard to the division of letters between proformas and spontaneously generated. I was quite alive to that.' This was evident from the briefs, where on multiple occasions he had highlighted a topic with a very high number of pro-formas, but no letters.

Given the low amount of time and effort involved in sending a pro-forma, compared to writing an individual letter, it is unsurprising that Mr Howard and his office paid less attention to these. It likely indicates that the individual was less committed to the issue, and thus less likely to impact their vote.

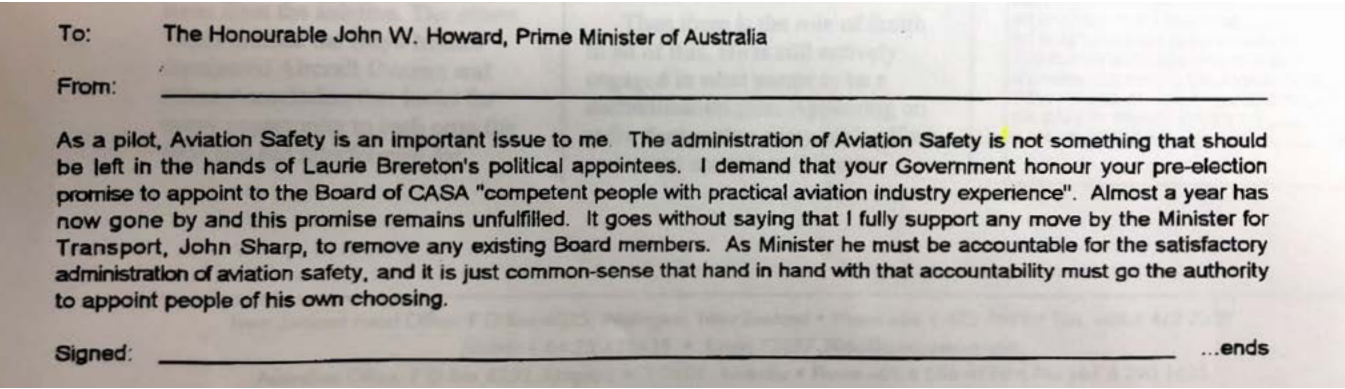


Figure 3: Example of a Pro-forma letter

Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: M4326, 616

Topical Issue	Previous Fortnight	This Fortnight		Total (Cumulative)
		Letters	Proformas	
1. Tasmania's multi purpose AFL stadium - Pro	0	0	1238	4660

Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: M4326, 666

8. Reduction in Family Day Care funding - Anti	1815	0	5845	29025
--	------	---	------	-------

Figure 4: Examples of highlighting the volume of pro-formas

Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: M4326, 277

Letters on a policy issue

Letters about policy, whether they are individualised, or part of a pro-forma campaign made up around 55 per cent of Mr Howard’s mailbag. However, as shown above, almost all of them were part of campaigns run by organised interest groups. There were still a range of individual letters on policy issues. Most of these letters would be referred to the relevant minister/department, and some were responded to by the prime minister or his advisors, particularly when it related to matters within his portfolio such as the appointment of the next Governor-General, or ministerial standards.

Individualised requests — requests for personal assistance

The final type are letters seeking assistance on a particular matter, and made up around 45 per cent of Mr Howard’s mailbag, averaging around 2600 per fortnight. These can vary from a visa issue for an elderly parent, social security problem, fixing a pothole, or exempting funeral processions from red light cameras (see Figure 5, right). In many cases, the individual is appealing to the prime minister after having exhausted all other avenues. Unfortunately, no detailed data is available on this category of letters. It appears most of these letters were referred to the relevant minister/department for them to address.

While we have limited visibility of these letters, it appears that these letters were often the ones that had the most impact on Mr Howard and his office. This issue is explored further below.

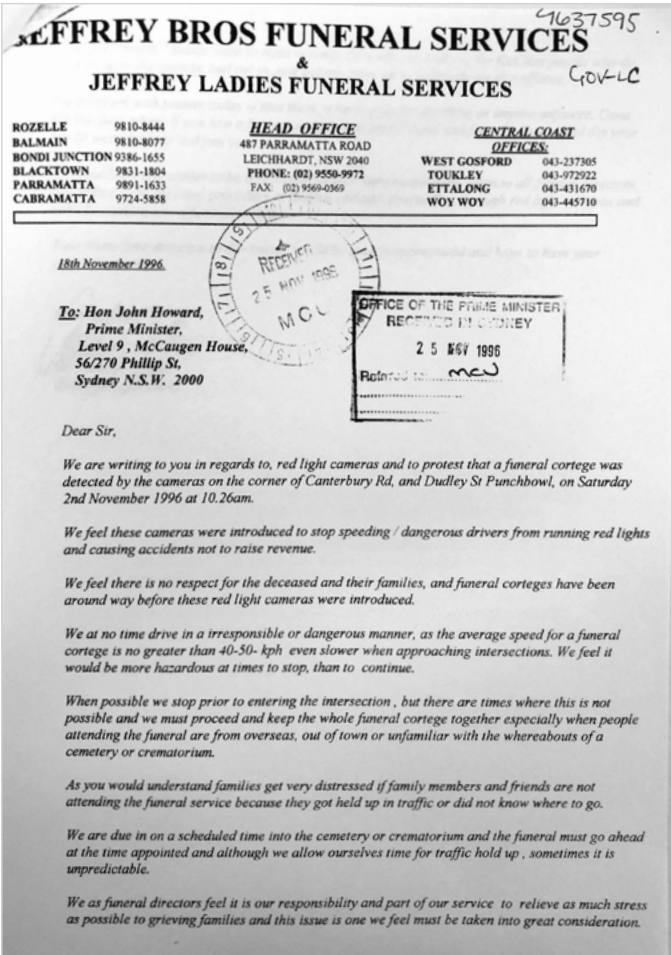


Figure 5: Example of an individualised request for assistance

Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: M4261, 30 Part 2

The language of the letters

As well as the subject matter, the language and tone of the letters can tell us just as much about how the public sought to engage with their political leaders. Given that most letters are not seen by the prime minister himself (or even his office), writers often seek to ‘claim stake,’ to help ensure their letter is seen and taken seriously.

A personal connection

‘I can recommend the cutlets on Mondays. They are very nice...’

Citizens expect a level of personal relationship with their leaders and want to feel that they are accessible. These letters can be deeply intimate and personal, a ‘last ditch’ pitch for assistance from individuals in desperate circumstances. People disclose details of their childhood sexual abuse (NAA: M4326, 1143), or the ‘horror of watching my daughter’s trauma as she slowly, despairingly, distressfully [died]’ (NAA: M4898, 10). Whomever read these letters, whether it be the prime minister, or a junior public servant, must have recognised the connection that the writer sought with their leader, and the trust that is being placed in that relationship. This is often because their request for help has not been answered elsewhere. A more general assessment of this tendency throughout recent history explains:

Writers implicitly believed that if they could reach a higher authority... they would receive human treatment and a sympathetic hearing... Citizens imagined that if sovereigns could only be made aware of the heartlessness of their subordinate officials, they would right all wrongs, ensure that their subjects were no longer mistreated, and in this way justice would prevail. (Lyons, 2020)

This is evident throughout the Howard correspondence. People would mark their envelopes ‘PERSONAL’ and highlight it repeatedly. Three university students, seeking support to become astronauts addressed their letter to Kirribilli House, rather than Parliament House, and started it with:

This letter is for the prime minister, and we ask that it be passed on to him directly and not redirected... [We] have a right to communicate with the prime minister. (NAA: M4326, 85)

They concluded it, in bold, ‘**We anticipate meeting with you to discuss our proposal further**’. While they didn’t get a meeting, or the financial support they requested, they did get a response from Mr Howard, rather than being ‘redirected’.

Other writers would use various techniques to try and ensure their letter was actually seen by the prime minister, rather than just an offsider. One writer, at the end of a typed letter calling for an apology to the stolen generation, added a hand-written PS:

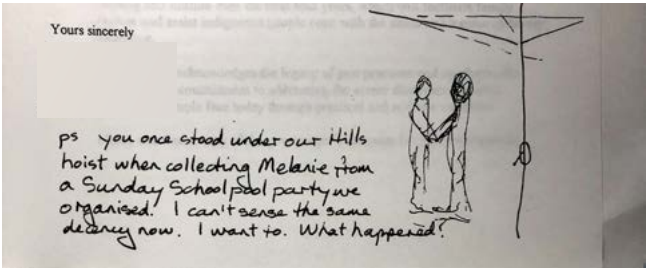


Figure 6: Example of a letter staking a claim for personal attention — Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: M4326, 496

This demonstration of a prior personal connection with Mr Howard ensured that the letter was placed onto Mr Howard’s desk. However, the writer got the same form response as others who wrote on this topic.

The owner of a small country hotel wrote to the prime minister two days before the 1998 election, seeking a personal connection by inviting him and Mrs Howard for a counter lunch:

I realize (sic) how busy you and your wife are now – with 2 days to go until the election... My husband and I own a small hotel in [REDACTED] and we work very hard to run the business... We would like to invite you to our hotel for a counter lunch... I can recommend the cutlets on Mondays. They are very nice... PS: Ring me and let me know your (sic) coming so I can organize a quiet corner for you. (NAA: M4326, 666)

She was not the only small business owner to invite the prime minister to ‘duck in for a cuppa,’ but all received the same, standard response.

Threats of losing their vote

Anger & disgust at politics

‘a discusted (sic) Liberal voter’

Another underlying theme in the letters is anger and disgust at politics and politicians. Again, this was not new, or unique to Mr Howard. Similar anger was evident in letters to Prime Minister Menzies (Lyons, 2020). People are often motivated to participate in politics when they are angry ‘a lack of trust in government might influence citizens to raise their voices’ (Lee & Schachter, 2019). This anger was often expressed as a voting threat. These writers recognised that their vote is only an effective weapon if they are current Liberal voters that threaten to defect (Clark et al., 2017). They sought attention by opening their letters with a clear political threat:

This is not a letter from a Labour (sic) voter, an eccentric or a person of feeble mind it is a letter from a Liberal voter of some fifty years standing... (signed) A discusted (sic) Liberal voter (NAA: M4898, 10)

As a former strong Liberal/National supporter I have now abandoned your Party – a thing I never thought would happen (NAA: M4898, 1)

Mr Howard was sceptical of these approaches, noting that:

you started to get quite a number of people saying look ‘I’ve always voted Liberal... I’m one of your greatest supporters but...’ you take a bit of notice of that but you also begin to smell a rat and think ‘Well they are not really supporters of mine at all, that’s just a way of trying to get my attention’. (Interview with Mr Howard)

Topics of the letters

As set out above, most of the letters on topical political issues were driven by interest groups, who encouraged their members and supporters to sign template letters, and then post/fax them back to Mr Howard. This sort of approach to interest group campaigning is well documented in the literature and is used by a wide variety of interest groups (Nownes & Freeman, 1998).

I have taken two different approaches to analysing what the major topics were in Mr Howard’s mailbag. First, looking at the most consistently salient topics. This identifies which topics most frequently appeared in the briefs on ministerial

correspondence. With around 180 unique topics appearing on the briefs across the period of study, most topics were barely a blip on the prime ministerial radar.

Table 1: Summary statistics of the frequency of topics appearing in briefs to Mr Howard				
1ST QUARTILE	MEDIAN	MEAN	3RD QUARTILE	MAX
1	2	5	5	65

Half of the topics appeared only twice, with 75 per cent of topics appearing five times or less. These issues could clearly be dismissed by Mr Howard and were unlikely to influence him. These issues (some examples are included in Table 2, below) are often attempts by niche interest groups to get their issues onto the prime ministerial radar. This approach is likely to be particularly important where an issue is unlikely to attract media attention, or there is a lack of contestation between political parties on the topic. Interest groups may also be more likely to be able to mobilise people where the individual benefit is greater, or more localised, such as aged care facilities in a small regional town, or an international social security agreement that will only benefit a small number of people.

Table 2: Examples of less salient topics		
TOPIC	NUMBER OF FORTNIGHTS	TOTAL VOLUME
Australian-German pension agreement	1	289
Erosion of medical services in outback Australia	1	890
Human rights in Burma	1	65
Accommodation for the Elderly in Cobar – Pro	2	162
World Horticultural Festival	1	362

While it is difficult to demonstrate that the letters had any direct effect, the Australian-German pension agreement was signed in late 2000! However, they do reveal the multitude of salient issues competing for very limited time and space on the political, public and media agenda. Issues that are only salient for a small section of the community will often struggle to get on the public agenda, so a letter writing campaign may be a practical way of getting their issue on the agenda. As is discussed after each election, ‘all politics is local,’ and these letters would help to identify potentially salient local issues.

Some topics stuck around across multiple years, demonstrating their ongoing salience in the public’s minds. This group of issues differs from the ones above. While some were major, national issues (such as the unfolding situation in East Timor, or the impact of the Wik native title case), others were still local/niche issues, but managed to attract attention from a large segment of the community, or larger/ more organised interest groups. For example, although the Port Hinchinbrook development and dredging of the Hinchinbrook channel were significant environmental issues (Lane & Corbett, 1996), their environmental significance alone does not explain the level of correspondence. Rather, it is a demonstration of the organisational power of The Wilderness Society, which organised the letter-writing campaign.

Table 3: Most consistently salient topics	
TOPIC	NUMBER OF FORTNIGHTS
Alternative site for Sydney’s second airport – Pro	65
Cuts to the ABC – Anti	45
Uranium Mining – Anti	45
Wik	42
Reduction in Family Day Care funding – Anti	37
Development at Hinchinbrook Island – Anti	31
East Timorese refugees	24

The second way of analysing the topics is by the volume of correspondence per topic. As with the previous analysis, most of the 180 topics had a very small volume of mail, with the median being less than 500 items, and 75 per cent of topics had less than 1600 items. However, 10 topics received over 10,000 items during the 5 years of this study.

Table 4: Summary statistics of the volume of mail per topic				
1ST QUARTILE	MEDIAN	MEAN	3RD QUARTILE	MAX
162	461	2038	1573	33656

While most topics appear on both tables, interestingly Wik, while it appeared in around 42 fortnights, was nowhere near one of the topics with the highest amount of mail. While East Timor; gun laws following the Port Arthur massacre; and pricing for blood glucose strips all experienced sudden surges of letters, the issue did not last.

Table 5: Topics with highest amount of mail		
TOPIC	TOTAL VOLUME	PROPORTION AS PRO-FORMAS
Reduction in Family Day Care funding – Anti	34,000	99%
Alternative site for Sydney’s second airport – Pro	30,000	90%
Cuts to the ABC – Anti	26,000	88%
East Timorese refugees	18,000	60%
Guns (combining pro/anti PM’s stance)	17,000	20%
Benchmark pricing principles to blood glucose strips – Anti	14,000	90%
Uranium Mining – Anti	14,000	96%

Many of these issues were major political and policy issues for the Howard government in its first two terms, but what is just as interesting is what is not on this list. The GST was announced in August 1998, and the 1998 election was fought overwhelmingly on the GST, and the legislation passed the Senate in June 1999. Yet, throughout this period, there were no GST-related topics in the briefs to Mr Howard. Similarly, opinion polls consistently reported that the economy was the most important issue for people, followed by health, education and social welfare (Martin et al., 2014). None of the top topics of the mail are on the economy/ unemployment/inflation, with only niche topics in health (blood glucose strips) and social welfare (family day care funding) making the cut. This seems to show that a spark, or key event/issue is usually needed, to enable interest groups to organise and turn latent opinion into activated opinion.

These letters, therefore, do not provide a balanced reflection of public opinion. They are more a ‘hazy reflection’ (Grey & Brown, 1970) of opinion. There is rarely a mass outpouring of letters in support of government policy, or congratulations for government action. With a few notable exceptions (election congratulations; Wik; gun laws; and views on Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech), the letters only reflect one side of the issue – opposing the government’s position or calling for the government to act. This creates a significant limitation in relying on letters to understand the balance of public opinion. However, these letters can provide information about the breadth and intensity of the opposition; the level of organisation of oppositional interest groups; and the issues that are not making the news.

Letter writing campaigns are particularly useful for groups trying to get their issue onto the public agenda, especially when it has been ignored by the media. Indeed, interest groups used these letter-writing campaigns as part of their broader lobbying efforts, and to stimulate media interest, as can be seen from the AOPA campaign, which was used as a springboard to get mainstream media coverage (NAA: M4326, 215). This is evident as you look further down the list of topics, that do not appear to reflect major external events, or government announcements. Around 1700 letters were received on landmines or almost 2100 on human rights for prisoners in Lebanon and Syria. While these are important policy issues, they received limited media attention. Therefore, mobilisation by interest groups, which can tap a large response from a small segment of the community, appears to be better at explaining the volume.

Election letters

A final, standalone style of letter is the congratulatory letter. There were also almost 5000 letters wishing the prime minister luck heading into an election or congratulating him after the 1996 and 1998 elections. Often these were hand-written, on elaborate stationery:

The Boyes family including our 4 month old grandson (Ewan) wish you all the best for tomorrow. We will be out on booths tomorrow working for a coalition win which is the only situation for our great country. God bless and thank you for your honesty and devotion to your high office. (NAA: M4326, 666)

You have done best for this country and her people, we are proud to have... a honest and down to earth person to run this beautiful [country]. (NAA: M4326, 666)

Win or lose... you have displayed immense courage to the convictions you hold and have steadily refused to be compromised or humiliated by your opponents. (NAA: M4326, 666)

These letters provide a counterpoint to the anger/disgust letters, above. They demonstrate that many people displayed a great trust and faith in their leader – and this inspired people to write.

Responding

‘the dry formula ‘your views have been noted’ is adequate.’

If people are writing, a public servant is responding. While hardly a glamorous part of a public servant’s job, Prime Ministers and their offices have always placed significant emphasis on ensuring that letters were responded to quickly and appropriately. Mr Brady recalls that the quality of PM&C’s drafting of letters to the public could often cause Mr Howard ‘agitation’ as they were ‘often pretty ordinary and the bureaucrat-ese... meant that the reader was going to be pissed-off straight away’. Mr Brady recalled the Prime Minister placing significant emphasis on the responses. ‘[H]e would say ‘well this is the most [important]... I want every letter to be, you know perfect.”

The importance of a timely and adequate reply was evident both from the letters themselves and from Mr Howard’s regular appearances on talkback radio. Where a constituent did not receive a response, or thought that they were being ignored, there was a real risk that they would ring into talkback, and talk to Mr Howard directly:

G’day, how are you? I sent you a letter a long while ago, right, for my boy and you never answered it and he’s a little bit upset over it (Transcript 20979, 30 October 2003)

I ask you prime minister, I sent you a letter and never received even a reply at all, so I’d be grateful for one now. (Transcript 21094, 4 February 2004)

On the other side, constituents would also call in to thank the prime minister:

Mr Prime Minister, I am one of the persons who write a fair amount of letters to you every year and would you believe even though I write to other ministers you are the only one who answers letters – you and your department. I really sincerely like to thank you for it. (Transcript 11967, 25 July 2001)

Recently, prime minister, my son Glen emailed to you and you responded with an email and you also wrote him a letter. I’d just like to thank you very much for that. Glen was thrilled with receiving a letter from you . (Transcript 20948, 10 October 2003)

Being heard, getting a response, matters. Both Mr Morris, who was Mr Howard’s Chief of Staff from 1996 to 1997, and Mr Leverett, who was the Departmental Liaison Officer from 1996 to 2001, similarly reflected on the importance of an appropriate reply:

most people just want to be heard... I soon learned how much, just listening, or responding, satisfied most people you know whether they agreed or not with the answer, the fact they’ve... had their view heard (Interview with Mr Leverett).

But people’s concerns, or ideas are actually being responded to. So, you know, that in itself is important, that OK, somebody bothered to write, and they got an answer back. It might not have been 100 per cent the answer they wanted, but they got an answer. In a democracy, that is obviously important. (Interview with Mr Morris).

These responses demonstrated that the leader was listening – and even if the writer didn’t get the help, or policy response they requested, at least they were not being ignored.

How did Mr Howard engage with the letters?

‘millions of bloody letter-writers are wasting their bloody time’

How did Mr Howard, and his office, engage with the letters? Did it have a significant impact on policy, or the public agenda? Prime Minister Menzies warned:

If the advocacy comes from a sufficient number of constituents, there will be a temptation to yield to it. There is always somebody to be found to complain by correspondence [about the issue at hand] (Transcript 96, 28 August 1959).

The risks of yielding to a mass of public opinion was a fundamental concern of democratic theorists, including the American founding fathers, with both Hamilton and Madison noting that there should not be ‘unqualified complaisance to every sudden breeze of passion, or to every transient impulse’ (Hamilton, quoted in Schlozman, 2012). Rather, while a leader needs to be conscious of public opinion, their duty is to act in national interest.

This dismissive attitude from Mr Menzies was reflected by Mr Morris, who said that ‘millions of bloody letter-writers are wasting their bloody time,’ in particular when it came to mass mail campaigns ‘they are complete ratbags... it’s a particular group... and fanatics....[it] just became bloody annoying.’ Mr Howard similarly – but more politely – emphasised that his views were rarely swayed by mass mail campaigns.

While Mr Leverett recalls the briefs provided by PM&C were always passed around the office. They were not regarded as a ‘key’ piece of intelligence, however, where new or unexpected issues appeared, but they could provoke further questions and exploration. In that sense, while they may not have impacted policy, they might help to get an otherwise ignored issue on the radar. Mr Howard noted ‘I had an understanding with my office and my department that if on a particular subject there was a surge of correspondence, you’d take a bit of notice of that’ however he continued ‘I mean we obviously weren’t moved by form letters signed by hundreds of people asking for a particular amendment to an obscure section of the tax Act to confer a tax privilege on a small section of the community.’

By late 2000 the briefs were no longer being routinely provided to Mr Howard, and instead were addressed to Mr Malcolm Hazell and Mr Tony O’Leary in his Office. This probably reflects the lack of importance placed on this information.

I have already noted that there are significant differences in the types of letters, especially between those driven by interest groups and individualised letters. This difference is reflected in the impact that these letters can have. Mr Brady organised for Mr Howard to regularly see a selection of letters from individuals. Mr Brady reflected:

... I wanted him to see the scale of misery that some people experienced in life... I remember one woman, [wrote] a letter from jail... she had something like five or six children by five or six different men, and the almost all of them had been had hit her, you know, and she’d been the subject of such domestic violence that would have escaped most people’s world... so... I would just put a little yellow sticky saying, just you know, ‘it shows how tough some people’s lives are.’ (Interview with Mr Brady)

Similarly, Mr Leverett noted:

some that tugged at the heartstrings... or there might be something that jumped out about it, that we would actually then show the PM... they just jump out at you as a very genuine person with a genuine problem that you know that they’re not... they haven’t necessarily been wronged, but they haven’t been treated kindly by the system either... (Interview with Mr Leverett)

As well as potentially helping in the individual cases, these letters may have revealed legitimate mistakes in administration or unintended consequences of government policy, which could then be addressed. In this way, these letters may have had a much broader impact on government policy and administration than the writer intended.

Using letters to shape public opinion

Another way of looking at how Mr Howard engaged with his correspondence is to look at when he specifically referenced these letters publicly. This can show that he is engaged with, and listening to, public opinion as expressed through the letters. It can also be used to construct ‘perceived majorities’ (Entman & Herbst, 2001), using the letters as evidence that public opinion is behind you.

The perception that the prime minister ‘speaks for the nation’ makes their claims around the reality of public opinion more powerful. The construction of a ‘perceived majority’ can then further shape public opinion, as those on the fence can rely on a ‘consensus heuristic’, and believe that public opinion is settled (Schmitt-Beck, 2015); and those opposing may be more reluctant to express opposition.

There are around 50 instances of Mr Howard referring to correspondence that he had received. In radio interviews, or other settings where Mr Howard was taking questions (such as at a community forum), he mainly used his mail to refute claims or positions put by the questioner. For example:

Journalist: How do you react to the number of businesses who claim that the GST has put them into bankruptcy. Do you think that’s the case?

Prime Minister: But I don’t get the mail that the GST has put people into bankruptcy. (Transcript 12028, 3 November 2001)

or

Journalist: prime minister why is the perception though among the pensioners that they are worse off?

Prime Minister: ... I get letters from pensioners containing detailed calculations that they have made indicating that they don’t believe that they are worse off. So you are talking about one side of the story, the other more silent side of the story is that many pensioners don’t feel that they are worse off. (Transcript 11911, 20 April 2000)

These exchanges are explicit attempts by Mr Howard to create perceived majorities, demonstrating that the caller’s/ questioner’s position is not widely held, and therefore does not require policy changes.

Conclusion

Letter writing has been part of democratic tradition for hundreds of years. In Australia, the proportion of people who report writing to, or emailing politicians in the previous 5 years has remained broadly stable at about 30 per cent (Cameron and McAllister, 2019). These letters can provide both an alternative 'bottom-up' history, as well as a nuanced lens on the opinion of this 'activated' or 'attentive' public. While Mr Howard appreciated the importance of his mailbag, this was tempered by the knowledge that this was only a 'hazy' reflection of public opinion, driven mainly by interest groups, and often on topics that would be unlikely to swing votes. Nevertheless, the trends in the mail were of interest to Mr Howard and his staff, as one of many early-warning systems about changes in public opinion, and the intensity of feelings on specific issues.

Equally important, however, was the individual letter, the anecdote, that struck a chord. In the same way as 'one death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic,' one well-written, heartfelt, direct letter could be more powerful than thousands of form letters. As Mr Howard said:

I think you need anecdotes, you need stories, examples of how things have been achieved, that's what you need and I think we, all of us, as political leaders need to remind ourselves that you have to provide real live flesh and blood examples.
(Transcript 10684, 17 August 1998)

So, what was the response to that initial letter? The writer did get a response, from Mr Howard's Principal Private Secretary, Mr Tony Nutt, stating that Mr Howard had indeed read the letter. While the majority of the response was standard words, it concludes 'I hope that in the lead-up to election day, you will view the number of measures the Government has planned and reconsider your support.' Whether that was sufficient to satisfy the writer we cannot know. Nevertheless, he was given the opportunity to participate in the daily dialogue between a leader and the public, an essential democratic right. For that, we should all be thankful.

References

- Broockman, D. E., & Skovron, C. (2018). Bias in Perceptions of Public Opinion among Political Elites. *American Political Science Review*, 112(3), 542-563. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000011>
- Cameron, S., & McAllister, I. (2019). *Trends in Australian Political Opinion - Results from the Australian Election Study 1987-2019*.
- Clark, W. R., Golder, M., & Golder, S. N. (2017). The British Academy Brian Barry Prize Essay: An Exit, Voice and Loyalty Model of Politics. *British Journal of Political Science*, 47(4), 719-748. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000442>
- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, (1979 - 2021) Annual Reports, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/summary/summary.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=dateLast;page=0;query=Title%3A%22Prime%20Minister%20and%20Cabinet%22%20Content%3A%22Annual%20Report%22%20Date%3A01%2F01%2F1978%20%3E%3E%2007%2F05%2F2021%20Dataset%3Atabledpapers;resCount=Default>
- Entman, R., & Herbst, S. (2001). Reframing Public Opinion as We Have Known It. In R. Entman & W. L. Bennett (Eds.), *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Grey, D. L., & Brown, T. R. (1970). Letters to the Editor: Hazy Reflections of Public Opinion. *Journalism Quarterly*, 47(3), 450-471. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769907004700302>
- Hooghe, M., & Marien, S. (2012). How to reach Members of Parliament? Citizens and Members of Parliament on the Effectiveness of Political Participation Repertoires. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 67(3), 536-560. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss057>
- Lane, M., & Corbett, T. (1996). Which way from here?[The future of Australia's World Heritage Areas is far from certain.]. *Habitat Australia*, 24(5).
- Lee, T. (2002). *Mobilizing public opinion : Black insurgency and racial attitudes in the civil rights era*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lee, Y., & Schachter, H. L. (2019). Exploring the Relationship between Trust in Government and Citizen Participation. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 42(5), 405-416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2018.1465956>
- Lyons, M. (2015). Writing Upwards: How the Weak Wrote to the Powerful. *Journal of Social History*, 49(2), 317-330. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shv038>
- Lyons, M. (2020). Writing Upwards: Letters to Robert Menzies, Australian prime minister, 1949-1966. *The Journal of Epistolary Studies* 2. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.51734/jes.v2i1.27>
- Martin, A., Dowding, K., Hindmoor, A., & Gibbons, A. (2014). The opinion-policy link in Australia. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 49(3), 499-517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2014.934655>

National Archives of Australia: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; A463, Correspondence files, annual single number series with occasional 'G' [General Representations]; item 1986/2605.

National Archives of Australia: The Hon. John Winston Howard, AC, OM; M4326, Ministerial correspondence of John Winston Howard as prime minister; 1996 - 2007; items 33, 49, 63, 94, 119, 129, 144, 151, 164, 175, 179, 215, 228, 269, 277, 314, 326, 345, 391, 411, 423, 433, 439, 448, 469, 484, 496, 516, 526, 539, 547, 578, 584, 599, 606, 632, 637, 654, 666, 674, 684, 728, 732, 751, 760, 766, 804, 816, 822, 844, 874, 883, 895, 913, 975, 989, 999, 1020, 1048, 1116, 1126, 1137, 1143, 1155, 1165, 1175, and 1226

National Archives of Australia: The Hon. John Winston Howard, AC, OM; M4261, Ministerial correspondence and briefings by advisers of the prime minister; 1996-2007; items 30, and Part 2, 210.

National Archives of Australia: The Hon. John Winston Howard, AC, OM; M4898, Correspondence maintained by the prime minister's Principal Private Secretary; 1996-2007; items 1, and 10.

Nownes, A. J., & Freeman, P. (1998). Interest group activity in the states. *The Journal of Politics*, 60(1), 86-112.

Powlick, P. J. (1995). The Sources of Public Opinion for American Foreign Policy Officials. *International Studies Quarterly*, 39(4), 427-451.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2600801>

Schmitt-Beck, R. (2015). Bandwagon Effect. In *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication* (pp. 1-5). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc015>

Schlozman, K. L., Verba, S., & Brady, H. E. (2012). The unheavenly chorus. In *The Unheavenly Chorus*. Princeton University Press.

Sherratt, T (2019). GLAM-Workbench/pm-transcripts (v0.1.0). Zenodo <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3549588>

Van Onselen, P., & Errington, W. (2008). *John Winston Howard: The Definitive Biography*. Melbourne University Publishing.



**Old Parliament House
18 King George Terrace,
Parkes, ACT 2600, Australia**

info@howardlibrary.unsw.edu.au

CRICOS #00098G