

ATTITUDES TO ABORTION IN AUSTRALIA: 1972 TO 2003

■ Katharine Betts

Since the October 2004 Federal election Australia has embarked on a new abortion debate. Some commentators suggest that public opinion has turned away from a pro-choice position. However the new 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes shows this is not so: 81 per cent of Australians are pro-choice and only nine per cent are definitely anti-choice. This and other surveys show that the only strong constituencies for change are among some evangelical Christians and some Coalition candidates in Federal elections. Women of child-bearing age are overwhelmingly pro-choice

The question of abortion was not discussed during the campaign preceding the federal election on 9 October 2004. However, since the Liberal and National Party Coalition's decisive victory the pros and cons of reviewing Australia's relatively liberal abortion practices have become a topic of intense controversy. A number of Coalition MPs have argued for change but Tony Abbott, Minister for Health, is the most prominent among them. Abbott has never concealed his personal uneasiness about abortion and, as a conviction politician,¹ appears determined that there shall be an open national debate and, if possible, a Parliamentary inquiry.² After a brief delay, the Prime Minister, John Howard, has announced that he would not oppose this campaign.³

Howard says that, while his Government will not introduce legislation to restrict access to abortion, it will not block any individual wanting to introduce a private member's bill,⁴ and Abbott has made it clear that he will not push for legal changes without public support.⁵ In response some press commentators have concluded that public sentiment has already shifted towards a more restrictionist position. They point to changes in medical technology which allow quite premature babies to survive and surmise that these changes may have altered people's attitudes.⁶ For example

Christopher Pearson, a columnist in *The Australian*, writes:

My guess is that new quantitative research would uncover some substantial shifts [in opinion on abortion]. Along with broad disquiet about the number of terminations, there's likely to be increasing concern about the proportion of healthy women aborting healthy fetuses, in what current cant calls 'a lifestyle choice'.⁷

Indeed some believe that the new debate is a product of a shift in public attitudes rather than of politicians' personal morality. For example, Christopher Newell, Associate Professor of Medical Ethics at the University of Tasmania, argues that politics and technological change are driving the new interest in reform and that abortion is 'on the agenda for debate again largely because a lot of federal politicians have identified it as an issue. If it hadn't been for that, there wouldn't have been a resurgence'.⁸

But have people changed their attitudes to abortion? There have been no public opinion polls published by the mainstream polling companies in recent years. The most recent (that I have been able to find) is a Morgan poll conducted in February 1998. This repeated a question that Morgan had asked in 1995 and 1996: 'And thinking about the termination of unwanted pregnancies through surgical abortion, do you approve or

disapprove of the termination of unwanted pregnancies through surgical abortion?’ This series found that the percentage approving had risen from 55 per cent in 1995 to 57 per cent in 1996 and 65 per cent in 1998.⁹ A 1996 Newspoll which asked a rather different question found that 50 per cent of respondents would allow abortion ‘to any women on demand in any circumstances’¹⁰ and that a further 40 per cent would allow abortion ‘if it is proven that pregnancy will cause psychological or medical harm to the mother’. Only seven per cent would not allow it under any circumstances. (Irrespective of their attitude to abortion, 65 per cent of the Newspoll respondents approved of the cost being claimable under Medicare.)¹¹

These findings suggest that, by the mid 1990s, a majority of Australians were pro-choice with only a tiny minority favouring a ban. If we contrast these findings with a series of five polls taken between 1972 and 1980 by McNair Anderson it is clear that opinion moved quite strongly in a pro-choice direction between the 1970s and the mid 1990s. While McNair Anderson’s question was more qualified than the one used by Morgan in the 1990s the data set out in Table 1 suggest that, in the 1970s, between

20 and 30 per cent of Australians favoured a laissez faire approach to abortion, and that a majority would permit it in certain specific circumstances. The 1996 Newspoll question is closer to the one used by McNair Anderson than is Morgan’s. If we compare it with the McNair Anderson series we can see that, between the mid 1970s and the mid 1990s, the proportion of Australians who supported unqualified access to abortion rose from around 30 per cent to around 50 per cent.

Despite the dearth of recent commercial polls, the 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) conducted by the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University was publicly released in September 2004.¹² This was based on a mailout questionnaire sent to a large random sample of voters.¹³ It included a statement on abortion: ‘A woman should have the right to choose whether or not she has an abortion’, response categories: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, can’t choose.

The survey shows no reversal of the pro-choice trend. Like the Morgan and Newspolls of the mid 1990s, AuSSA 2003 found that most respondents were pro-choice: 43 per cent strongly agreed

Table 1: Circumstances in which abortion should be legal, 1972 to 1980, per cent

<i>Which [of these responses] comes closest to your opinion? Abortion should be legal.....</i>	1972	1973	1975	1978	1980
In all circumstances, that is, ‘abortion on demand’	19	23	29	31	28
In cases of exceptional hardship, either physical, mental or social	23	20	23	23	23
If the mother’s health, either physical or mental, is in danger	27	21	24	22	22
Only if the mother’s life is in serious danger	15	19	14	13	12
Abortion should not be legal in any circumstances	11	13	9	8	8
No opinion/ no response	5	4	0.4	3	7
Total	100*	100*	100	100	100
Total N			2046	1993	2095

Sources: (McNair Anderson) The data for 1972 and 1973 were published in the Melbourne *Herald*, 18 September 1975; data for 1975, 1978 and 1980 are available from the Australian Social Science Data Archive, sources D0238, D0270 and D0280 <<http://assda.anu.edu.au/>> accessed 13/11/2003.

with the statement and 39 per cent agreed. Only nine per cent disagreed (four per cent strongly). The size of the sample (N=4270) and the number of questions allow us to explore the characteristics of those who are pro-choice and those who are not in some detail.

Table 2 shows the overall response pattern. There was some variation by education and income (with graduates and people from more affluent households more supportive of choice than non-graduates and poorer people). However, the variations by socio-economic status are not marked.¹⁴ But as Table 2 makes clear, religion is different. There is a marked gap in attitudes to abortion between people who have a religious outlook and those who do not: 93 per cent of people who have no religion are pro-choice compared to 77 per cent of those who do have a religion. There is also a difference between people adhering to different types of religion.

Members of the main non-Christian religions have a similar attitudes to the sample as a whole, as do Anglicans, members of the Uniting Church, and Presbyterians. But relatively speaking,

Catholics are less pro-choice than the sample as a whole. Nonetheless, 72 per cent of Catholics are pro-choice and only 15 per cent favour restriction. It is the subgroup of evangelical protestants (Baptists, Lutherans and Pentecostals) who are the most likely to favour restriction but, even here, more of them favour choice than favour restriction.

While Table 2 shows that religious beliefs affect attitudes to abortion it does not point to any clear support base for a change in existing practices. Table 3 presents attitudes by gender, with responses for women in the fertile age-group categories (18 to 49) shown separately. It shows that 87 per cent of women aged 18 to 49 are pro-choice and that this proportion does not vary very much by whether they already have children or not. On this analysis there is no strong constituency for restriction except among a minority of evangelical Christians.

The long series of polls conducted by the Australian Election Study (AES) after each Federal election (from 1987 to 2001) provides a different perspective on patterns of opinion over time. Here we

Table 2: Attitudes to abortion by religion, AuSSA 2003, per cent

<i>A woman should have the right to choose whether or not she has an abortion</i>								
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose	Total	Total N
Total	42	39	7	5	4	2	100	4219
Does not have a religion	58	35	5	1	1	1	100	1079
Does have a religion	37	40	8	7	6	2	100	2900
<i>Type of religion:</i>								
Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Jewish	46	35	5	3	3	8	100	118
Catholic	33	39	11	8	7	3	100	993
Anglican, Uniting, Presbyterian	42	44	7	4	2	2	100	1429
Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal	17	36	10	15	21	2	100	178
Orthodox	36	42	8	8	2	2	100	83

Source: AuSSA 2003 (see endnotes 12 and 13 for details)

Note: The total column excludes 51 people who did not answer the question on abortion: other column percentages exclude those who did not answer the sub-question concerned.

Table 3: Attitudes to abortion by gender, women's age, and whether or not they have children, AuSSA 2003, per cent

<i>A woman should have the right to choose whether or not she has an abortion</i>								
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose	Total	Total N
Total	42	39	7	5	4	2	100	4219
Men	36	44	8	5	5	2	100	1956
Women	48	34	6	5	4	2	100	2220
<i>Women aged 18-49:</i>								
All women 18-49	55	32	5	4	3	2	100	1115
Those who have children	54	32	5	4	3	2	100	982
Those who do not have children	57	33	5	3	2	1	100	125

Source: See Table 2.

have responses from the electorate in general (the voters' surveys) and from people who were running for office (the candidates' surveys).¹⁵ Table 4 confirms the overall pattern suggested by the poll data and the 2003 AuSSA survey. In general very few Australians favour a ban on abortion, and the proportion favouring no restriction at all has grown steadily since the late 1980s. This pattern holds both for the minority who stand for election and for the majority who vote for them.

However, when we look at attitudes to

abortion by political party affiliation the situation alters. Table 5 shows the proportions of voters and candidates who endorsed the first option in the AES abortion question by party affiliation (main parties only): 'Women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want one'. In the case of the voters their party affiliation is the party that they gave their first preference to in the Houses of Representatives; in the case of candidates it is the party for which they stood.

Labor voters are only slightly more

Table 4: Attitudes to abortion, AES voters and candidates, 1987 to 2001, per cent

<i>Which of these statements comes closest to how you feel about abortion in Australia?</i>							
	Year	Women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want one	Abortion should be allowed only in special circumstances	Abortion should not be allowed under any circumstances	Don't know/ no response/ missing	Total	Total N
Voters	1987	38	54	6	2	100	1830
Candidates	1987	36	54	6	3	100	612
Voters	1990	50	39	6	5	100	2037
Candidates	1990	53	38	5	3	100	429
Voters	1993	55	34	5	6	100	3023
Candidates	1993	57	36	3	4	100	415
Voters	1996	53	37	5	5	100	1797
Candidates	1996	62	32	2	4	100	439
Voters	1998	49	39	4	8	100	1897
Voters	2001	56	32	4	8	100	2010
Candidates	2001	59	31	3	7	100	477

Source: AES, voters and candidates, conducted after each federal election from 1987 to 2001. See endnote 15 for details.

Note: There was no candidates survey in 1998. The wording of the question differed slightly in different surveys; the wording used in 2001 is as shown in Table 4. For other variants see Appendix 1.

Table 5: Attitudes to abortion by party affiliation, AES voters and candidates, 1987 to 2001, per cent

<i>Women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want one (per cent who agree)</i>								
	Labor voters	Labor candidates	Liberal voters	Liberal candidates	National Party voters	National Party candidates	All voters	All candidates
1987	40	59	38	13	36	15	39	38
1990	56	73	48	20	43	11	53	55
1993	59	78	59	32	55	12	59	60
1996	62	75	52	25*	40	25*	56	65
2001	63	72	59	30*	54	30*	61	63

Source: See Table 4. Numbers of voters and candidates in each party-affiliation group are set out in Appendix 2.

Note: *The 1996 and 2001 candidates' surveys do not distinguish between Liberal and National Party candidates; they are simply coded 'Coalition'.

The all voters and all candidates columns include supporters of minor parties. In some years minor parties account for more than half of the candidates surveyed.

pro-choice than Liberal and National Party voters. But there is a strong difference between the three sets of candidates. Labor candidates are more pro-choice than Labor voters though, by 2001, the distance between them had narrowed to nine per cent. In contrast, Coalition candidates are much less pro-choice than Coalition voters. The 1993 data suggest that Liberal candidates were not as restrictionist as National Party candidates; unfortunately the 1996 and 2001 surveys amalgamate the candidate data for the two parties. Even so it is clear that, in 2001, Coalition candidates were distant from their voters on this question; Liberal voters were nearly 30 per cent more likely to be pro-choice than Coalition candidates and National Party voters 24 per cent more likely to be so.

On a variety of other social questions (Aboriginal affairs, capital punishment, and equal opportunity for women and for migrants) Coalition candidates have been closer to their voters than Labor candidates have been to theirs. This is also true of attitudes to economic questions concerning taxation and welfare.¹⁶ But it is not true of abortion. Perhaps this is because access to abortion is an intensely personal question with the potential to affect almost everyone in the community, either directly or through

the circumstances of someone they care about. This may place it beyond the divisions in opinion on other social issues, some of which (such as the republic or reconciliation) tend to be more symbolic in nature.

Most Australians are pro-choice but it is probable that an even larger majority would prefer a situation in which women did not need to resort to abortion. However commentators who imagine that the tide of opinion is swinging towards a more restrictionist position are mistaken. There is no sign of this; on the contrary the reverse is the case. There has indeed been a resurgence of interest in abortion law reform. But the cause of this resurgence is much more likely to be found within the hearts of some Coalition MPs than in any reversal of feeling within the electorate.

Appendix 1: Wording of the abortion question in the Australian Election Study

1987: 'Do you think that women should be able to obtain an abortion easily when they want one, or do you think abortion should be allowed only in special circumstances?' Response categories: obtain abortion easily; special circumstances only; no abortion under any circumstances.

1990 to 2001: 'Which one of these statements comes closest to how you feel about abortion

in Australia'? Response categories: women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want one; abortion should only be allowed in special circumstances; abortion should not be allowed under any

circumstances; don't know. This wording was the same in all five sets of surveys from 1990 to 2001 except that 'don't know' was not offered as a response category for candidates in 1993.

Appendix 2: Numbers of respondents by political party, AES 1987 to 2001

	Labor voters	Labor candidates	Liberal voters	Liberal candidates	National Party voters	National Party candidates
1987	900	147	595	125	159	77
1990	812	114	745	95	110	35
1993	1382	175	1228	168	118	59
1996	622	110	793	122*	99	122*
2001	690	88	783	85*	77	85*

* The 1996 and 2001 candidates' surveys group Liberal and National Party candidates together as 'Coalition' candidates.

References

- ¹ See M. Duffy, *Latham and Abbott*, Random House Australia, Sydney, 2004, pp. 376-377.
- ² See P. Karvelas, 'Female MPs snub Abbott's inquiry', *The Australian*, 12 November 2004, p. 2.
- ³ S. Lewis and P. Karvelas, 'Howard backs MP debate on abortion', *The Australian*, 11 November 2004, p. 1
- ⁴ See M. Metherell and M. Todd, 'Door open to tougher abortion law', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 2004, p. 1.
- ⁵ See E.-K. Symons, 'Abbott to mums: adopt out, not abort', *The Australian*, 11 November 2004, p. 8.
- ⁶ C. Pearson, 'Abortion debate on demand', *The Australian*, 6-7 November 2004, p. 20; Christopher Pyne referred to in Pearson, 6-7 November; E.-K. Symons, 'Ready for a choice dispute', *The Australian*, 13-14 November 2004, p. 27; 'Abortion issue needs careful debate, free of tawdry deals', *Sun Herald*, 7 November 2004, p. 30
- ⁷ C. Pearson, 'Not just women's business', *The Australian*, 13-14 November 2004, p. 20
- ⁸ Quoted in Symons, op. cit.
- ⁹ See 'Almost two-thirds of Australian approve of abortion', Finding 3058 <www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/1998/3058> accessed 10/11/2004.
- ¹⁰ The question was: 'Thinking now about the topic of abortion, which one of the following options regarding abortion are you yourself most in favour of? Abortion should be...?' Response categories: Not allowed under any circumstances; only allowed if it is proven that the pregnancy will cause psychological or medical harm to the mother; allowed to any woman on demand in any circumstances; uncommitted. Sample: 1200 adults aged 18 plus in all Australian states, date 20-22 September 1996. Source <www.newspoll.com.au> accessed 10/11/2004
- ¹¹ The question was 'Regardless of whether or not you support abortion, are you yourself in favour or against the cost of abortion being claimable under Medicare? If in favour — is that strongly in favour or partly in favour? If against — is that strongly against or partly against?' In all 32 per cent were strongly in favour, 33 per cent partly in favour, 12 per cent partly against, 16 per cent strongly against and seven per cent were uncommitted. See endnote 10 for further details about the poll.
- ¹² R. Gibson et al., *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* [computer file], Canberra, Australian Social Science Data Archive, the Australian National University, 2004 <<http://assda.anu.edu.au>>. The original researchers are not responsible for my interpretation of their data.
- ¹³ The response rate was 44 per cent, yielding a final sample size of 4270 voters. This may seem low but commercial pollsters do not publish theirs. It is, however, rather lower than the response rates for the Australian Election Studies discussed below, largely because the researchers did not have access to up-to-date electoral rolls as a sampling frame. (Personal communication, Shaun Wilson, ANU.)
- ¹⁴ Forty-six per cent of graduates strongly agreed compared to 38 per cent of non-graduates, and 47 per cent of people in households earning \$78,000 p.a. or more strongly agreed, compared to 39 per cent of those in households earning less than \$32,000 p.a.

¹⁵ For a description of these surveys and for bibliographical details see K. Betts, 'People and parliamentarians: the great divide', *People and Place*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2004, p. 81. The authors of these surveys are not responsible for my analysis of their data.

¹⁶ *ibid.*