

# Are the pollsters leading Tony Blair onto the euro-rocks?

*Anthony Scholefield points to the puzzling bias of the questions put by pollsters in surveys of opinion about the single currency*

**W**hy do opinion polls consistently ask polling questions on the euro which are biased in favour of entry?

At least four polling organisations ask questions on a reasonably regular basis on public attitudes to joining the euro. These are, no doubt, effective in gauging the changing mood of the electorate, but there are strong grounds for thinking that they are likely to produce results that underestimate opposition to joining. *And because of their inherent bias there is no chance of any of the questions asked by the pollsters being used in an actual referendum.*

The questions recently asked by the pollsters were:

**The ICM/Guardian Poll - June 2002:** *If there were to be a referendum, would you vote to join the European single currency, the euro, or would you vote not to join?*

Vote to join - 25%  
Vote not to join - 58%  
Don't know - 17%

**The MORI Poll - July 2002:** *If there were a referendum now on whether Britain should be part of a single European currency, how would you vote?*

In favour of a single currency - 31%  
Against a single currency - 55%  
Don't know - 14%

**NOP/Barclays Capital - July 2002:** *If the referendum on the single European currency were held today, would you vote for or against replacing the pound with the euro?*

In favour - 25%  
Against - 61%  
Don't know - 14%

**CGC/NOP - May 2002:** *If there was a referendum [on the euro] tomorrow, would you vote 'yes' or 'no'. [No - "don't knows" in this poll and the basis*

*of the poll is unclear]*

For - 41%  
Against - 55%

**YUOGOV - June 2002:** *If there were a popular referendum on whether Britain should join the single European currency (the euro), how would you vote?*

In favour - 39%  
Against - 47%  
Don't know - 9%  
Would not vote - 5%

One can rank these questions in order of pro-Euro friendliness.

- 1 **YouGov**
- 2 **CGC/NOP**
- 3 **ICM/Guardian**
- 3 **MORI**
- 4 **NOP/Barclays Capital**

The YouGov is the most euro friendly because it makes use of the phrase 'popular referendum'. For obvious reasons this is likely to be misunderstood.

The NOP poll is the least euro friendly because it is the only one to introduce the idea of 'replacing the pound'. The other pollsters are silent on this. As between the ICM and MORI, there is little to choose.

Although one should not put too much weight on the distinctions because the polls were taken at different times, the NOP poll shows the highest anti-euro vote, which is what one would expect from the wording.

However, because of their bias there is no likelihood of a referendum question being anything like any of the questions asked in the polls. Therefore their estimates of the absolute percentage voting on either side in a euro referendum are likely to be wrong, even if their estimates of the relative changes between the two sides

over time are accurate.

Some eurosceptics regard the biased poll questions as a reflection of the great pro-EU bias of the metropolitan elite. But it would surely be the height of folly for pollsters to persist in asking questions in such a way as to mislead the Government into calling a referendum on what were apparently favourable auspices only for it to be discovered later that, when responding to a fair question, voters were decidedly less pro-euro than had seemed to be the case.

The bias is all the more puzzling given that two of the polls appear in eurosceptic newspapers and that professional pollsters are well aware of just how important the terminology of the question actually is.

Barclays Capital, in a report in 2000, said: "The lesson of this analysis is that the government could significantly reduce opposition to EMU (sic) membership by wording the referendum question in a simple but pro-EMU way. Opposition could also be reduced by making the decision to join a 'YES' decision and by saying in the question that this was what the government recommended."

MORI's Chairman, Robert Worcester, in 2000 said in respect of the 1975 referendum: "In the run up to the decision, knowing that in opinion polls the question wording is vital and that the British public are from 5 per cent to 10 per cent more likely to agree with a 'YES' positive answer than to disagree with a 'NO' negative answer, I advised the Prime Minister [Harold Wilson] to ask: 'Should Britain remain in the Common Market or should it get out'."

How are the pollsters questions biased?

The first thing to notice is that these questions are asked suddenly in the middle of a questionnaire about other matters whereas a referendum ballot

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## Are the pollsters misleading Tony Blair?

should follow a balanced information campaign and adequate public debate. As Nigel Smith, the recently appointed Chairman of the NO Campaign put it: "As voters learn more about the change option and the motives of those proposing it they become more cautious. What might have initially seemed like a good idea is, during the closer scrutiny of a referendum campaign, seen to carry risks and so the electorate's natural preference for the status quo prevails."

Without exception, every poll has shown that the more information the public has on the full meaning of joining the euro, the greater is the opposition to joining it. The Electoral Commission, the Human Rights Act and judicial review are the means which will ensure that the electorate gets the information.

### Unanimous Approval

Second, the Maastricht Treaty makes it clear that the decision on whether or not Britain should join the euro is a matter for a proposal from the European Commission to the ECOFIN Council and requires a majority in that body and (as far as the rate of joining is concerned) the unanimous approval of all the euro governments. Nobody knows what the timetable or order of events in a euro referendum will turn out to be. Should Labour stick to its manifesto and give the British electorate 'the final say' on 'joining' the euro - which presupposes that all the negotiations with the EU are complete and the rate of entry and the terms and conditions are known - then indeed the pollsters' questions might be valid if unbalanced. However, the National Changeover Plan, postulates a referendum *before* negotiations and without the electorate knowing the rate of joining or the conditions of joining. In such circumstances, all the pollsters' questions would be deeply misleading since they suggest to the electorate that it will have the last word when, in fact, the final decision will lie with the EU Commission and ECOFIN. Without exception all the polling questions quoted above are misleading since

those polled are led to believe that the decision is for them.

Third, such an enabling referendum question would not pass the 'intelligibility' test of the Electoral Commission unless the rate of entry and the conditions of entry were agreed. The government will certainly not make its final decision until these are known and the voters who may be in favour of joining at one rate and not another - such as Kenneth Clarke and Charles Kennedy - would have to vote to keep the pound since, on their own admission, entry at the wrong rate could be economically damaging.

Examining the text of the questions, we can see that only one organisation referred to the replacement of the pound in its question. To avoid a political or legal challenge to the question the Nairn Committee urged in 1996 that the significance of the question would have to be 'fully understood' by the public. To include the information that the pound would be replaced should surely be part of that 'full understanding' and the results of NOP/Barclays' poll, relative to those in the four other surveys, demonstrates the importance of this. Moreover, the Maastricht Treaty refers on three occasions to the 'irrevocable' nature of entry to the euro. Because of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and the Human Rights Act, there is likely to be a barrage of litigation if the question or other parts of the referendum process are seen to be unfair. Arguing for the omission of the 'irrevocable' word when it is so strongly featured in the Treaty would be difficult.

### Yea-saying

Then we must consider Robert Worcester's point about the tendency of the electorate to vote 'yes' - a phenomenon known as 'yea-saying'. All of these pollsters' questions are biased in favour of eliciting a 'yes' answer or a positive answer.

For example, as we have seen, the NOP/Barclays Capital question is the least euro-friendly but it is still biased

towards a 'YES' vote. The following question displays an equivalent bias from the opposite perspective:

*If a referendum on replacing the pound with the single European currency were held today, would you vote for or against keeping the pound?*

### Human preference

Similarly, the YouGov question might be reformulated in order that the NO side might benefit from the natural human preference to be positive rather than negative:

*If there were a popular referendum on whether Britain should keep the pound, how would you vote?*

For this reason, to avoid the bias of yea-saying, the electorate should be given the choice of two propositions. One formulation, which would avoid accusations of bias of any kind - assuming that the full facts were known and that the referendum was *not* of the enabling variety - might be:

*Britain should keep the £ as its national currency and not enter the single European currency irrevocably at the rate of ..... and on the terms negotiated by the government.* □

*Britain should not keep the £ as its national currency and should enter the single European currency irrevocably at the rate of ..... and on the terms negotiated by the government.* □

This would indeed give the British voter 'the final say' as promised in Labour's 2001 manifesto.

The public statements of the Electoral Commission's Chairman, Sam Younger, show that it is fully aware of the importance of giving the electorate the choice between two propositions as all the alternatives are likely to lead to controversy and litigation.

So why do the pollsters persist with questions which are so obviously open to criticism? They certainly exaggerate pro-euro support. It is also worth noting that the "don't knows" are likely to come down heavily on the status quo side, i.e. keeping the pound, for the reasons given by Nigel Smith. Are the pollsters leading Tony Blair onto the euro-rocks?