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

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

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.
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 email 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.

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 mailbox, 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.”

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.”

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...”

(Transcript 12525, 19 June 2001).
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;
2. Pro-forma/template letters on a policy issue; and
3. 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.

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.
Letters on a policy issue

Letters about policy, whether they are personalised, or part of a pro-forma campaign, made up about 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 a funeral procession 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.

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: 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. 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

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 officer. One writer, at the end of a typed letter calling for an apology to the stolen generation, added a hand-written PS:

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 meeting to discuss his proposal. He wrote:

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

NAA: M4326, 496

This is another example 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.

She was not the only small business owner to invite the prime minister to ‘dine 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 (Lyon, 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 & Schachtner, 2019). This anger was often expressed as a voting threat. These writers recognised that their vote is only an effective weapon if it is 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 (NA: M4988, 18)

As a former strong Liberal/National supporter I have now abandoned your Party – a thing I never thought would happen (NA: M4988, 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUARTILE</th>
<th>MEDIAN</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>3RD QUARTILE</th>
<th>MAX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1ST</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2ND</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>NUMBER OF FORTNIGHTS</th>
<th>TOTAL VOLUME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian-German pension agreement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erosion of medical services in outback Australia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights in Burma</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation for the Elderly in Cobar — Pro</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Horticultural Festival</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>NUMBER OF FORTNIGHTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative site for Sydney’s second airport — Pro</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuts to the ABC — Anti</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uranium Mining — Anti</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wik</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in Family Day Care funding — Anti</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development at Hinchinbrook Island — Anti</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Timorese refugees</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUARTILE</th>
<th>MEDIAN</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>3RD QUARTILE</th>
<th>MAX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1ST</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>2038</td>
<td>1573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2ND</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>2038</td>
<td>1573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3RD</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>2038</td>
<td>1573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAX</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>2038</td>
<td>1573</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>TOTAL VOLUME</th>
<th>PROPORTION AS PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in Family Day Care funding — Anti</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative site for Sydney’s second airport — Pro</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuts to the ABC — Anti</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Timorese refugees</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guns (combining pro/anti PM’s stance)</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark pricing principles to blood glucose strips — Anti</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uranium Mining – Anti</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
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 handwritten, 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: ‘[He 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 19967, 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, 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

... 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 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)

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 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)

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.
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


Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, (1979 - 2021) Annual Reports, https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/searchSummary?summary.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=date-eLast;page=0;query=Title%3A%22Prime%20Minister%20and%20Cabinet%22%0 Content%3A%22Annual%20Report%22%0Date%3A01%20%1979%20-%0 %3E%3E%202%0Dataset%3Atabledpapers;resCount=Default


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, M4898, Correspondence maintained by the prime minister’s Principal Private Secretary, 1996-2007; items 1, and 10.


