One of my first encounters with market research was the most refreshing and also probably the most honest. I approached a professional in this field to undertake some research and his first question was: What results do you want? He was not joking. Market research – and associated exercises – find out what you want to know. It has never claimed that it can establish the truth in a particular situation.

Second-guessing the democratic system

There is a worrying trend by a number of people to try to find other ways to get around what they see as the rather tedious democratic system – they try to second-guess it. Even more seriously, there is a trend to take the results seriously as if they were a proper election poll.

It is all too easy to confuse democracy with the actual election and the announcement of results – it is much more than that. It is the run-up to election day, when the would-be representatives have to bring their manifestos to the people and try to convince them that theirs is the best way forward. This is an essential part of the democratic process and it is why instant elections are not allowed in real democracies.

So every four or five years, most politicians have to take to the streets, to be attacked by rabid dogs, to be seen kissing babies and to stand in the rain arguing with thoroughly unreasonable people who hate them. This is how they get elected. Anyone who has done this is very glad when it is all over. The people who get elected feel they have been through a rite of passage and are naturally proud that the people saw fit to entrust them to
represent them. The elections over, they now want to get on with the business of governing.

What they do not want is to be running the election every other month. Yet that is what so many public consultation programmes are based upon: some method or other to second-guess the democratic system. These break into three main types:

- Market research – quantitative and qualitative
- Consensus conferences and citizens’ juries
- Hands-on public consultation exercises of various kinds.

**Market research – the dangers**

In classical marketing, the first step is market research. Traditionally, this was undertaken to find out what demands there were in the marketplace for goods – it looked for gaps. So, in the 1950s, it would have been obvious that in Europe there was a huge unfilled market for electrical goods, from refrigerators to television sets.

Today, in the UK, almost everyone has a television and four out of five have a video recorder. Interestingly, the number of high earners with a VCR is almost the same as the number of low earners. So for the company which wants to sell VCRs today, it has to be far more sophisticated in its market research techniques, adding on extra features such as extra-fast rewind to satisfy an ever-demanding marketplace. But with increasingly sophisticated tastes and with demands for basic and luxury goods almost satisfied, companies are now seeking to drive the marketplace to whet people’s appetites for goods.

The standard techniques are still in wide use: either quantitative market research – through surveys and the like – or the more sophisticated qualitative research through mechanisms like focus groups, which try to get to an extra layer of understanding. Both have problems when dealing with controversial projects.

**Quantitative market research**

This can be done by telephone, face-to-face or by written questionnaire. However, all these techniques face one fundamental obstacle: people do not tell the truth.

Take something as non-contentious as what we eat. In *Food in History* (revised edition, Penguin 1988) Reay Tannahill quotes a Euromonitor report which shows 63 per cent of people saying they increased their intake of fruit