

Australian Cartoonists' Caricatures of Women Politicians—From Kirner to Stott-Despoja

Haydon Manning

In June 1999, the Labor Party's deputy leader, Jenny Macklin, argued that cartoons such as the following two of Meg Lees were offensive and demeaning to women politicians because they reflect the cartoonists' limited and unimaginative view of senior women in politics. For Macklin, women politicians are stereotyped as housewives, or objects for male sexual gratification, rather than depicted as 'the politician that is the woman'.¹ These claims are worth examining and are done so here in relation to cartoonists' caricatures of some senior women politicians, in particular former Democrat leaders Meg Lees, Cheryl Kernot and Natasha Stott-Despoja; former Victorian Premier, Joan Kirner and the phenomenon that was Pauline Hanson's One Nation.² The following cartoons by Mark Knight and Bill Leak are indicative of what so annoys some women politicians.

Over the last decade or so, increasing numbers of women entered our parliaments, made their mark as ministers, a couple became state premiers and, in general, wielded legislative power with sufficient frequency to become household names. Not surprisingly, cartoonists felt the need to comment on the virtues, or otherwise, of their actions and, in so doing, exposed a group unused to this sort of scrutiny. I'm asking readers to weigh up whether or not Macklin and her supporters are really rather thin skinned or whether they do have a case against cartoonists, who are mainly male and middle aged.



'Senator Meg Lees and Prime Minister John Howard',
Mark Knight, *Herald Sun*, 29 May 1999



'Senator Meg Lees holding the "whip hand" with Prime
Minister John Howard',
Bill Leak, *Weekend Australian*, 22–23 May 1999

On the face of it, it is not difficult to see how some cartoons offended some feminists, many of whom perceive the 1990s as a decade of 'backlash' against the women's movement. Macklin and her supporters were provoked by cartoons, in particular those dealing with then Democrats leader Meg Lees's negotiations with Prime Minister Howard over the GST's passage through the Senate but, more generally, by what they perceived as the cartoonists' failure to transcend sexist stereotyping. A worrying aspect of Macklin's argument concerns its possible desire to censor, an outcome likely to diminish the cartoonists' craft and their so-called 'larrikin tradition'. At the very least, Macklin presents a serious critique of contemporary political cartooning, and it deserves careful inspection. My argument does not imply that cartoonists should enjoy unlimited licence to lampoon, but Macklin, and those who rallied in support, perceived a level of sexism which is, arguably, not as prevalent, nor as disturbing, as first appears.

Joan Eveline and Michael Booth point out in the pages of the *Australian Journal of Feminist Studies* that when women politicians ask for special treatment at the hands of the cartoonists they undermine the wider claim to equality of treatment.³ They make the point that for 'a century feminists have entertained the wish that women would bring a morally better politics to bear on parliamentary life. Recent feminist discussion points out that the notion that women will do it cleaner and better than men is itself a way of minimising the presence of women'.⁴

This interesting observation points to a potential dilemma at the heart of Macklin's critique, namely that by seeking special treatment for women politicians from the cartoonists, under the guise of combating sexism, the very opposite outcome may follow. The potential arises to belittle women politicians as fragile and 'thin-skinned', and always likely to struggle at playing the 'man's game' of politics. Women who reach positions of leadership in contemporary parliamentary politics are powerful individuals and, as a consequence, no longer require the same degree of protection from gender discrimination followed by numerous institutions and workplaces. Thus, to attack the cartoonists from a position of considerable power perhaps indicates a hankering to silence the ranks of one's potential critics. Sexist cartoons are, of course, a reflection of wider male views toward women and a regrettable feature of some cartooning, although, as this chapter argues, it is not

an endemic feature of contemporary Australian political cartooning. Before examining the issues Macklin raised, it is important to first reflect briefly on what political cartoons may claim is unique to their genre.

The political cartoon

An engaging and provocative political cartoon may claim a degree of universality via its capacity to help us find the kernel of truth in what otherwise appears as inexplicable or perplexing actions by our political leaders. As Patti Miller points out, political cartooning concerns ‘the censuring of behaviour and attitudes through the powerful force of ridicule, or “laughing with knives”’.⁵ Libel laws may quell a journalist’s spirit, but drawing blood is a licence cartoonists must enjoy if their art is to have integrity and purpose.⁶ It’s often said that they are the modern-day court jesters ‘set apart by their licence to mock the king’ and, as Joan Kerr points out, ‘What black-and-white artists throughout the ages have had in common is not from the maleness, whiteness or gloominess, but a missionary zeal to show us as we are, warts and all—indeed, warts above all—in ways that we all understand and appreciate’.⁷

Cartoonists employ a variety of techniques as part of what Gombrich calls their ‘armoury’.⁸ The armoury is potentially hurtful but is not obviously expressive of an inherent gender bias. Rather, cartoonists apply to powerful individuals various techniques to conjure archetypal or stereotypical imagery and metaphor. Stereotypical cartoons are more likely to be sexist because they rely more on social prejudice and bias. At least until the 1960s, the stereotypical fat capitalist and greedy unionist were recognisable caricatures appearing frequently in editorial cartoons, and, today, National Party politicians are instantly recognisable via the customary single stick of wheat protruding from their lips. These are all stereotypes we recognise. They play on hazy assumptions about the individual’s identity, and that is an important point because, for the most part, even through our amusement, we manage to recognise the inherent inadequacy of the stereotype. Archetypes, on the other hand, refer to the deeper rhythms of human relationships. They engage with recurring mythological motifs, images and psychic instincts of the human species that may be symbolically elaborated in various ways, most notably with

theological symbols, mythologies and legends. Cartoonist with the *Australian* Bill Leak defends himself, in part, by suggesting that his images and caricatures of women politicians rely more on archetypal connotations than mere cheap sexist stereotypes. Of course, it is debatable whether or not he consistently avoids such stereotypes.

For a moment, let's look more closely at the nature of metaphor which is so frequently used by political cartoonists in the endeavour to strike an immediate chord with their audience. Gombrich argues: 'In cartooning, as in language, there are metaphors which are so widespread that one may call them universal or natural metaphor'.⁹ In this context we find very common metaphoric contrasts such as light for hope or good; dark for threat or evil; fat for rich; thin for poor; youth for innocence, or the future and age for experience. Perhaps among the most powerful are the endless variety of 'physiognomic' or human-animal metaphors that generally transcend time, age and cultural differences.¹⁰ With respect to gender differences depicted in political cartoons, Seymour-Ure observes that these tend to be confined to the 'simplicities of motherhood and the contrasts of physical strength'.¹¹ Relationships forged in the bedroom need to be added, especially given Australian cartoonists' frequent delight with this arena as an amusing site for depicting political deal making. Whether bedroom scenarios render stereotypes or archetypes is open to interpretation, but it is clearly a site rich with metaphors playing on lust and sexual guile, insecurities and peccadilloes and, of course, power relations.

Before proceeding further, some clarification of how sexism is defined is important. Sexist caricature of women involves the use of stereotypes which are, by any public and recognised standard, rooted in false and oppressive assumptions concerning female behaviour. Invariably, such false assumptions prompt discriminatory social attitudes and foster stereotypes that demean women via appeal to their gender rather than reference to the position they may hold (actually or potentially) within a social grouping, political party or institution. Sexist cartoons are, therefore, focused squarely on some aspects of a woman politician's gender, rather than a demonstrable character flaw or physical feature open to exaggeration and ridicule. In general, sexist stereotyping may occur when it depicts, in derogatory manner, motherhood, housewifery, obsessive dress/fashion consciousness, or when sexual, rather than strategic, political guile is used to gain political advantage. In effect,

it is not fair play to poke fun at women politicians via implied sexual or romantic temptations. To a point this is reasonable, and certainly in the past gender stereotypes often saw male politicians depicted in cross-dress as women. In such instances the feminine 'roles' equate with political weakness or failure. For example, at the time of Australian federation and the first national government it was commonplace for cartoonists to cast doubts upon political leaders' masculinity by drawing them as housewives, midwives, nurses, and washer women, and in various states of cross-dress.¹² The following cartoon depicts Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, as maternal housewife, with the clear implication of ridicule.

Caricaturing women politicians—Kirner, Kernot, Lees, Hanson and Stott-Despoja

Not amused by the way Bill Leak depicted Meg Lees's negotiations with John Howard over the passage of the GST through the Senate, Jenny Macklin bemoaned the fact that 'yet again most of our



'Prime Minister Edmund Barton',
Livingstone Hopkins ('Hop'), *Bulletin*, 1900¹³

cartoonists have displayed a limited and narrow view of senior women in politics. So far this year we have seen the prime minister depicted as lifeguard, poet, cat, professor, Very Small Man, sun bather, Darth Vader, jockey—many of these *in relation to* the GST. A similar range of imagery might just as easily be applied to women.¹⁴

The *Age* reported Jenny Macklin's claims against the cartoonists under the headline: 'Polka dots to GST spots: a woman's life in Politics Ink', and in similar vein, the *Australian* sniggered: 'Sexist cartoonists given the whip hand'.¹⁵ Before too long the issue spread, with feature articles appearing on the op-ed pages.¹⁶ While conceding that 'some of the drawings display elements of humour and allegory', Macklin maintained that, overall, they 'paint a sorry picture about the inability of our political satirists to see the politician that is the woman'.¹⁷

Leak's cartoons of Meg Lees with a belligerent John Howard, and the one at the beginning of this chapter showing Meg Lees holding the 'whip hand' depict Lees, the newly elected Democrats leader, 'negotiating' with John Howard. To Leak, and most commentators, it appeared that Lees did (or at least in very obvious metaphor) hold 'the whip hand'. Leak chose to defend himself, and, by extension, many of his colleagues, first in writing and then more belligerently using his craft.¹⁸ However, in what was perhaps a predictable response from Leak, the 'Bunny Macklin' cartoon did little to help his otherwise strong written defence. But it does say much about the intrinsic value and 'edgy' humour of the larrikin cartoonists and how their work actually reflects the deeper satiric tradition embodied in the role historically played by the court jester.

Patti Miller reports of her interviews with many Australian cartoonists that Leak 'is the only one who states without hesitation that he would not self-censor on any topic, although he says he would approach with trepidation the trinity of church, feminism and gun control because "lobbyists or activists in each of these have no sense of humour"'.¹⁹ Defending his caricatures of Lees and Kernot, Leak argues he uses appropriate metaphors to depict the power relations between Prime Minister John Howard and Lees during their negotiations and, while conceding that some may see sexual stereotypes at work, they should also see that the roles portrayed are essentially of equal partners to a political deal. He observed that it's commonplace for cartoonists to exaggerate physical features and



'Senator Meg Lees with a belligerent Prime Minister John Howard during the GST negotiations',
Bill Leak, *Weekend Australian*, May 1999



'Jenny Macklin lampooned',
Bill Leak, *Weekend Australian*, 22-23 May 1999

wryly notes that no one complained about his caricatures of portly Senator Mal Colston who he drew bigger and uglier than ‘Jabba the Hutt’.²⁰ Obviously bemused by the fuss, Leak points out that some women politicians purchase and display his cartoons; for example, Senator Lees purchased the dominatrix cartoons for her parliamentary office.

How should we view Leak’s depiction of Lees as dominatrix? If we perceive sexism at work, then Lees becomes a prostitute who enjoys momentary power when dealing with a powerful man who has paid for the service. Clearly, the image is sexist if we assume Howard has paid for the ‘pleasure’, but equally valid is the view that these cartoons could refer to a private arrangement between two lovers or ‘players’ where Lees is clearly in control, relaxed, and enjoying herself. On the other hand, the cartoonist may be pointing out that Lees prostituted her party’s principled opposition to the GST in return for recognition of her leadership. Yet it is also possible that Leak may be trying to say something much more about John Howard—his impotence, perhaps. It is not uncommon for Leak to ridicule John Howard in this way as the cartoon overleaf on Howard’s impotence, from the previous year, illustrates.

Human sexual relationships present many possible archetypal metaphors that are likely to strike immediate chords of recognition and perhaps should not be so readily construed as sexist stereotyping.

Searching for the evidence

To test Macklin’s charge I will examine a range of cartoons depicting the political lives of four recently prominent politicians: Joan Kirner, Cheryl Kernot, Pauline Hanson and Natasha Stott-Despoja.

Joan Kirner became Premier of Victoria in August 1990 when John Cain resigned over a series of failures in the finance sector. She inherited a political nightmare, and the cartoonists revelled in their depictions of an embattled premier, but it was their focus on Kirner’s appearance that drew criticism. According to Elizabeth van Acker, Kirner endured an unrelenting array of offensive caricatures that either focused on her physical appearance or presented her as a housewife, baffled and out of her depth.²¹ For her part, Joan Kirner expressed particular dislike toward *Herald Sun* cartoonist Jeff Hook’s frequent depiction of her in a polka dot dress: a garment she



‘Howard’s impotence?’, Bill Leak, *Australian*, 19 June 1998

pointed out she’d never worn.²² Hook’s caricatures, shown in the following two cartoons, certainly convey a sense of ridicule regarding Kirner’s credentials to lead her state, but are these examples of sexist stereotyping? Cartoonist with the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, Cathy Wilcox offers some particularly useful insights into the matter. She observed how women are generally quite sensitive when it comes to caricature, especially over their appearance. As a young cartoonist she recalls losing a lot of girlfriends due to her caricatures. In addition, while it ‘might be a terribly sexist thing to say, physical beauty is so prized among women, anything that undermines that is likely to hit harder than for men’.²³ Mindful of this, she says that ‘while I would cartoon on any topic, I sometimes notice I am reluctant to go in hard on women politicians who are already copping enough’.²⁴ While Hook’s polka dots are not particularly clever, they do convey a clown-like disposition—a method common to ‘the cartoonist’s armoury’ whereby political leaders are caricatured to invite ridicule. For example, Kevin Rudd is drawn by Bill Leak as the boyish ‘Tintin’, the character made famous in Hergé’s comic strip. While an element

of compliment is perceptible here, the message Leak conveys is one of an inexperienced leader who may struggle to be taken seriously by the electorate.

It is reported that when Kirner asked Hook why he drew the polka dot dress, he replied with references to other politicians: 'Well, Mrs Kirner, I know how to draw Henry Bolte, and I know how to draw Bob Hawke, or John Cain, or Paul Keating, but I've never had to draw a woman in power before and I don't know how to draw you.'²⁵ This honest admission of difficulty derives from the obvious fact that few women have occupied positions of power, and it should not be construed somehow as an admission that his cartoons are sexist. The point at issue concerns cartoonists' endeavours to diminish the importance of prominent persons by presenting them as ordinary or foolish. Such diminution of a politician's stature seems to be the best interpretation of Kirner wearing a polka dot dress. Well known in this regard is the example of the *Guardian's* cartoonist Stephen Bell's caricatures of former British prime minister John Major. Bell often drew Major with Y-front underpants worn outside his trousers because, as Bell explains, the 'underpants are simply a metaphor for uselessness ... I was looking at his record in office hitherto. It was a sorry tale of non-achievement ... so I



'Premier Kirner confronts political opponents',
Jeff Hook, *Herald Sun*, 4 March 1991

drew him as a crap Superman'.²⁶ Notwithstanding his admission of difficulty drawing Kirner, Hook's caricatures seem to follow the same thread. They question the leader of a party that had lost its way, and making the leader look foolish is always fair game. A case may be put that this is unfair, but, at the time, many Victorians probably shared Hook's sentiment.

While Hook's cartoons of Kirner are memorable there is only mixed evidence to support Jane Sullivan's view that 'there were endless cartoons of her as a fat, frumpy housewife in polka dot dresses and moccies'.²⁷ While polka dots abound, my examination of the *Herald Sun*, between August 1990 and June 1991, failed to reveal Kirner wearing moccasins. In general, cartoonists endeavoured to comment upon Kirner's first state budget and the general malaise of the Victorian government in classic manner, by playing on facial appearance, hair style and physical size. For the most part, they are rather unremarkable cartoons, but each is competent as comic commentary; they are faintly amusing and not particularly sexist.

Leading a minor party holding the balance of power in the Senate affords power disproportionate to actual electoral support. For a time, Cheryl Kernot enjoyed such power until she took the calculated risk of defecting to Labor, with the hope of one day becoming a federal minister. Cartoonists had a field day pondering the roles played by Labor leaders Kim Beazley and Gareth Evans in encouraging her defection. We later learned, courtesy of journalist Laurie Oakes, that, with regard to Evans, the cartoons were particularly prescient, as Evans and Kernot had amorous relations. Leak's cartoon parodying Delacroix's 'Liberty Leading the People' and his depiction of Kernot in bed with Evans and Beazley were criticised, with Kernot saying they 'set out to rob me of a conscious will to make a decision'.²⁸

These images drew fire, but do they deserve to? At first blush Leak's use of the 'bedroom' metaphor seems to employ gender stereotyping of a sexist kind but is more ambiguous on closer analysis. While perhaps somewhat passé, activities between the sheets remain reasonable metaphoric means to convey the view that people, especially politicians, will do anything to secure power.

Moreover, the bedroom is often a source for memorable cartoons. For example, Leak's cartoons during 2003–04 of Prime Minister Howard in bed with President Bush or curtly telling his



'Premier Kirner depicted with Prime Minister Hawke and Treasurer Keating negotiating Victoria's debt problems', Jeff Hook, *Herald Sun*, 4 March 1991

wife, during Bush's 2003 visit to Australia, to vacate the bed—'Au contraire, you'll be sleeping in Melanie's room and George will be in here with ME!' (*Australian*, 21 October 2003)—are memorable for their cutting satire.

These cartoons set John Howard up for deep ridicule, whereas Leak's depiction of Kernot in bed with Beazley and Evans presents anything but ridicule or the suggestion of a submissive woman. Leak stressed that his bare-breasted Kernot 'Leading the people' is a portrayal of her as a heroine and, arguably, this is not a particularly disempowering or sexist image.²⁹ However, the roles of Beazley and Evans contrast sharply with their counterparts in the original painting. Delacroix paints the figures below his heroine as serious and worried, whereas Leak's Beazley appears full of himself and his eyes even a little sinister. Does Beazley's grin betray a certain smugness? And Evans seems simply overcome with the joy of having won Kernot to the party cause, or his, perhaps? Whatever the case, for Leak they've managed to disrobe John Howard, who is part naked, from the waist down, in the cartoon's foreground.

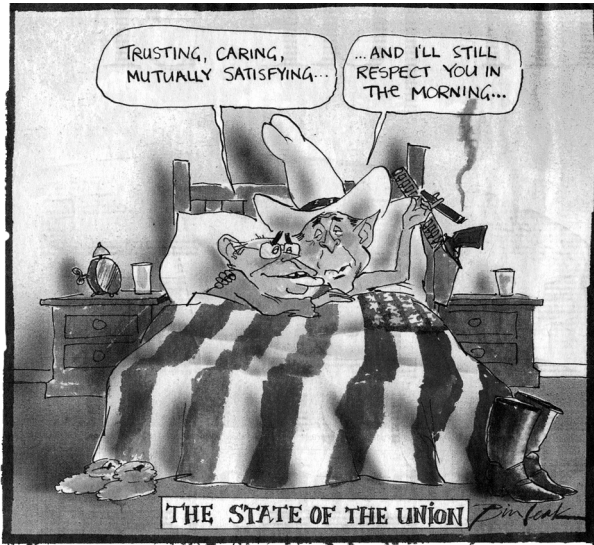
Historically, the portrayal of women bare-breasted was symbolic of power and nurture, and harks back to statues of Roman goddesses. This is the intent of Delacroix's 'Liberty Leading the



'Beazley and Evans celebrate with their "prize", having knocked Howard and Reith over',
Bill Leak, *Australian*, October 1997



'Cheryl Kernot in bed with Labor leader Beazley and his deputy, Evans',
Bill Leak, *Weekend Australian*, 18–19 October 1997



'John Howard and President Bush embrace',
Bill Leak, *Australian*, 24 January 2004

People', but the same cannot be said in today's context. As audience, we ponder here a sexualised image, but one which invites complicated analysis. The cartoon lacks the mechanical obviousness of sexism for it is plausible that it depicts Kernot triumphant about to deliver on her dream—a woman whose sexuality is neither repressed nor demonised. On this interpretation the imagery may be viewed as subverting sexist stereotyping. Leak responded to those who wrote and complained about his Delacroix parody by wryly observing that: 'People see what they want to see in cartoons'.

Turning to other cartoons dealing with Kernot's defection we find no caricatures relying on sexist stereotypes. For example, John Spooner in his anthology, *A Spooner in the Works* (1999), sketches Kernot as 'Xena Warrior Princess' about to rescue Beazley from the preying two-headed 'Costello–Howard' monster, while Pryor warns of the likelihood of Kernot confronting 'culture shock' in her new party as the factional heavies 'welcome' her to their ranks (as shown in the cartoon above).

This cartoon is instantly recognisable and raises the question: are we viewing the image of a helpless woman confronting 'The



'Beazley ushers Kernot into the ALP',
Geoff Pryor, *Canberra Times*, 16 October 1997

Machine'? If so, the cartoon has sexist connotations, but the people being stereotyped here as grotesque manipulators are men; the sexism could well be anti-male.

Moving from the defection to the time of Kernot's campaign Nicholson produced a potentially controversial cartoon. Kernot appears as a vamp in full evening dress and says to an implied Kim Beazley, 'Is that a policy in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me'. The sexist stereotyping and sexual innuendo are obvious enough, but the context provides a strong defence for the cartoonist. Kernot had appeared recently resplendent on the front page of the *Australian Women's Weekly* dressed in red evening dress and feather boa. This action demonstrated her preparedness to play to stereotypes if they would help her electoral fortunes, and Nicholson is simply taking the opportunity to expose a possible double standard. Politicians constantly play at manipulating their images for political advantage and here Kernot 'gets what she deserves' in a parody of her own rather craven attempt to remain in the public eye. Clever parody should not be admonished because it may be interpreted as sexist. Rather, it should flourish as a crucial element of a cartoonist's licence to expose the nation's political elite to comic and satirical criticism.

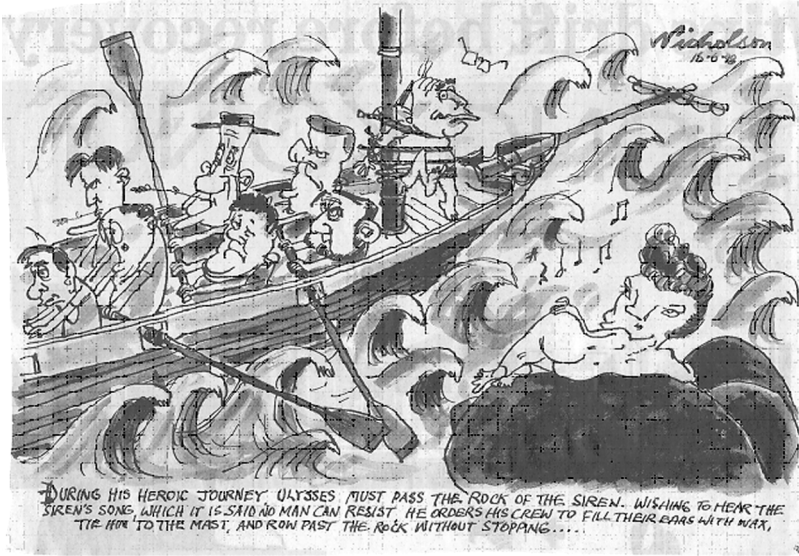
Cartoonists' caricatures of Pauline Hanson play, for the most part, upon her face but are mainly concerned with making the



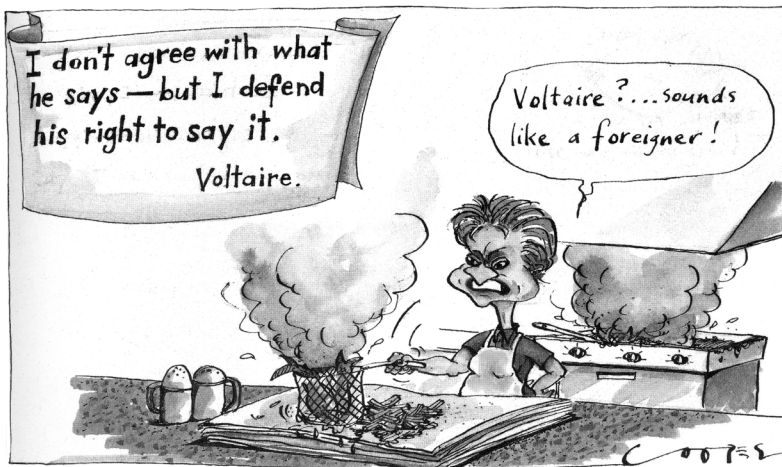
‘Kernot asking Labor leader Kim Beazley for “policy guidance” in the lead-up to the 1998 Federal Election’, Peter Nicholson, *Australian*, 30 March 1998

political point clear, namely that her politics are filled with prejudice. Peter Nicholson, in the following cartoon, draws Hanson generally as comic relief with a persona of an obviously overwhelmed and confused individual. One of his more memorable cartoons employs a Greek mythological metaphor depicting Hanson as a siren luring Prime Minister Howard to the rocky shore. While the cartoon employs a classic sexist stereotype of the lascivious woman, it hardly does much favour to Howard, who is depicted as a man without control as his face juts forward and foot strives to break free.

The point that occurs in relation to many of the cartoon caricatures of Pauline Hanson is the consistency with which cartoonists’ endeavour to portray her ordinariness. A sense of vacuousness is conveyed by the depiction of her face, often as large, and her eyes are either prowling with political menace or wide eyed as if to be overwhelmed. The degree that there is any sexist stereotyping present in these and other cartoons of Hanson lies with the extent to which she appears overwhelmed and out of her



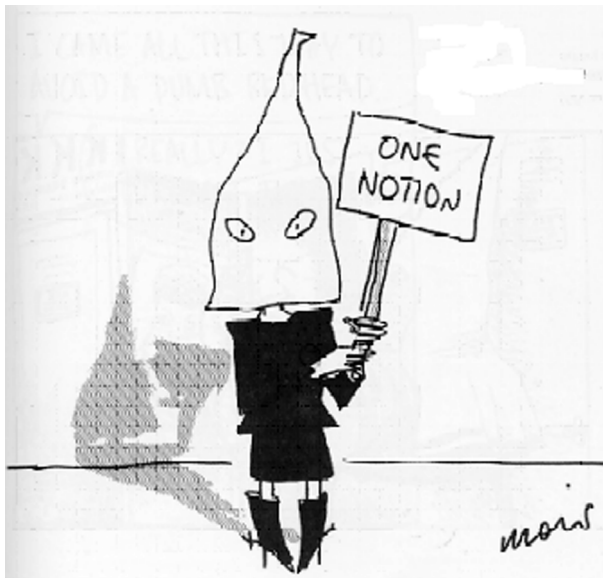
'Howard tempted by the siren, Pauline Hanson',
Peter Nicholson, *Australian*, 16 October 1998



'Hanson the former fish & chip shop proprietor',
Jenny Coopes, *Sun-Herald*, 1997



Typical caricature of Hanson,
Rod Clement, *Australian Financial Review*, 10 April 1997



Typical caricature of Hanson,
Alan Moir, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1997

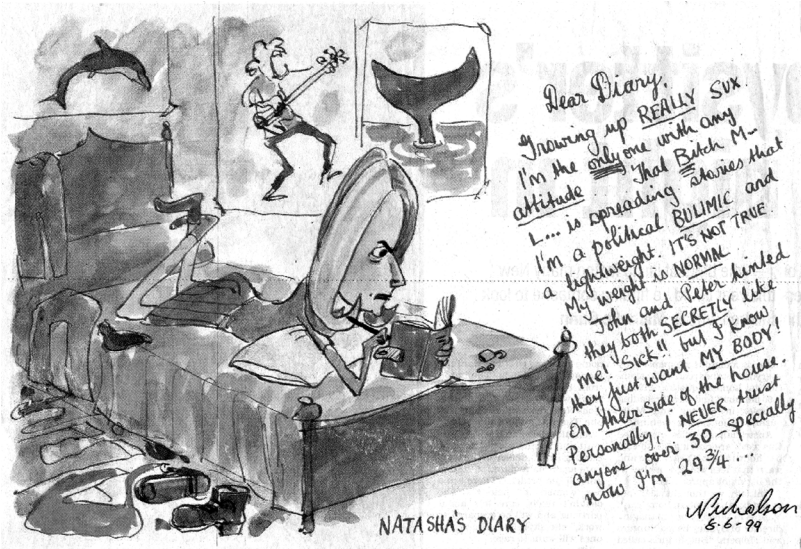
depth engaging in the ‘man’s game’ of politics. But this requires a very keen eye for the sexist stereotype, something which, in my view, is largely absent from cartoons of Hanson.

The case of Natasha Stott-Despoja’s demise as leader of the Australian Democrats during the winter months of 2002 is, arguably, one most propitious for testing Macklin’s argument. The young and attractive Stott-Despoja was a prominent face in the media and she had allowed many and various photo opportunities during her time as leader, including a swimsuit frolic in tropical Queensland waters. As the following cartoon illustrates, she suffered the cartoonists’ ridicule more on account of her age than her gender when she first alerted journalists to her disgruntlement with Meg Lees over the GST negotiations in 1999. Having deposed Lees as leader after a ballot of Democrat members in 2000, she faced, during her third year as leader, a sustained attack from the Democrats’ right wing. Lees led the charge, accusing Stott-Despoja of poor performance and an autocratic style.

She returned fire, and, in the heat of battle, Lees chose to leave and form a new party, while Lees’s ally, Andrew Murray, remained within the ranks but declared himself as a ‘Democrat in exile’. With the party divided over Stott-Despoja’s leadership and ideology, events came to a head when four of the six Democrat Senators presented their leader with ten demands. Disillusioned with the crumbling of support, she decided to resign the leadership. These events occupied considerable media space, and, in light of the Democrats’ subsequent electoral decline, the attention was probably warranted. As for the cartoonists, one may have expected a steady flow of sexist stereotyping of the young and pretty leader embattled, but none was apparent. For the most part, the cartoonists focused on what they saw as petty squabbling among individuals who, having prided themselves on being ‘different’ from the major parties, appeared quite capable of losing focus and being driven by ego.

Conclusion

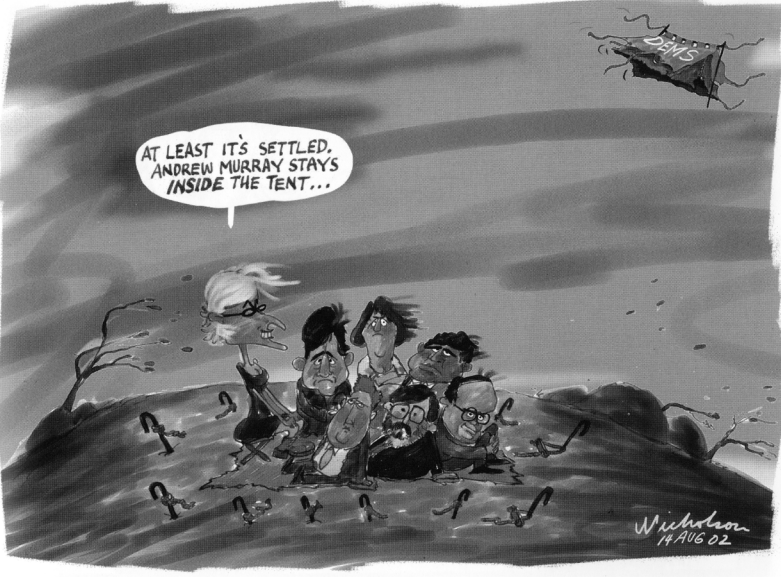
What is the state of political cartooning? Opinions differ, with Peter Coleman suggesting that political correctness has undermined its boldness, while Craig McGregor is confident that the ‘golden age of cartooning is right now’.³⁰ A notable dissenter here is Hogan, who



'Natasha unhappy with Meg for spreading "stories"', Peter Nicholson, *Australian*, 6 June 1999



'Disunity is death', Jenny Coopes, *Sun-Herald*, August 2002



'Tent', Peter Nicholson, *Australian*, 14 August 2002

THE TEN POINT PLAN ..



'The ten-point plan to reform party processes represented ten daggers for the leader', Alan Moir, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 August 2002

argues that political cartoonists lack balance in their criticisms of political leaders and this, in turn, acts to undermine public confidence in our democratic institutions.³¹ It seems that both the art of political cartoonists and their licence to mock the kings and queens of parliamentary life are not well appreciated in some quarters. The call for self-censorship, and implicitly for editorial censorship, issuing from some feminists, poses a threat to the art of cartooning. The purpose here is to defend the cartoonists charged with sexist depiction of Australian women politicians in the late 1990s. I've argued that while many cartoons dealing with prominent and powerful female politicians cause feminist ire, they are open, in most instances, to quite varied interpretation. Effective political cartooning requires, as Seymour-Ure suggests, the 'wide-eyed innocence or child's ability to spot that the Emperor has no clothes', and Australian political cartoonists are quite expert at this task.³² The lesson Cathy Wilcox drew from her days at school drawing her girlfriends is salutary in this regard, for maybe a number of powerful women politicians are simply too sensitive to the lampooning they receive. Given the historic absence of women in Australian parliaments, this is perhaps not a surprising human reaction, and it is fair to say that cartoonists have struggled at times drawing women in power. That is, relatively speaking, their caricatures of women political leaders are not as consistently funny as caricatures of male leaders. Herein lies a legitimate observation, even critique, but it is one ill suited to identifying sexist predilections at work.