

Introduction: Controversial Images

Haydon Manning and Robert Phiddian

The last few years have been big for cartoon controversies in Australia and around the world. There was the fear that political cartoonists would be muzzled under the new sedition laws delivered for Christmas 2004 by the federal government. Then there was the international uproar over the Danish cartoons of Mohammed. Before that entirely settled, relations between Australia and Indonesia were sorely tested by Bill Leak's trademark tastefulness in depicting the Indonesian president sodomising a Papuan. Then the *Sydney Morning Herald* refused to run an only averagely scatological Leunig cartoon about John Howard, perhaps using 'taste' as a cover for political sensitivity. It goes on.

There appears to be a growing sensitivity to cartoons' potential impact in public debate, and so it is a good time to ask what the role of cartoons is in Australian politics, policy and media. This collection brings together cartoonists, media professionals and researchers all, in their different ways, fascinated by the contribution cartoons make to our public life. The range of backgrounds of the contributors has led to a rich range of writing styles and approaches; as editors, we have not sought to impose a uniform method on the chapters, but have especially encouraged the cartoonists and media professionals to write from their experience rather than in an imitation of academic style. Another inevitable limitation of the volume is that, while it does give one of the more extensive accounts of recent Australian political cartooning in print, it cannot claim to be comprehensive. We have tried to be as thorough as

possible in confronting the themes and issues relating to newspaper cartooning, and a consequence is that we have not managed anything resembling a representative treatment of the work of the many cartoonists across the nation's many newspapers. Readers will sometimes look in vain for detailed commentary on particular significant cartoonists, and for that we beg indulgence—to achieve that with justice would have required a book thrice the size.

The problem (and opportunity) this book faces is that there is not yet a large scholarship on political cartoons (in Australia or internationally) to engage with, presumably because cartoons do not belong to any particular academic discipline rather than lack of intrinsic interest in them. Do cartoons belong to art historians, political scientists, students of media, or interdisciplinary scholars of satire? It's not clear who 'owns' them, so there is no clear, pre-existing intellectual framework to shape debate. Consequently, the quite personal accounts of life as an editorial cartoonist, as a newspaper caricaturist, and as a freelance cartoonist, from Geoff Pryor, Ward O'Neill and Fiona Katauskas, provide valuable and scarce reflection on the practice of cartooning and a good place to start. For Pryor, editorial cartoonist at the *Canberra Times*, his working day is divided into two parts—'Before Idea' and 'Post Idea'. 'Once I've settled on a "goer" then the tension lifts. The hard part of the day is over. From now on the problems are strictly technical—how to create a tableau which will best convey the idea I have in my mind.' The *Australian Financial Review's* O'Neill explores how the work of the newspaper illustrator often blurs the boundary with the editorial cartoon. As he explains, often enough the boundaries with cartooning are breaking down 'because of enabling technological change, an encouraging political climate and the innovative influence of particular artists'. One need only think of the searing political satire of O'Neill's illustrations or, for that matter, John Spooner's brilliant work in the *Age* to see the validity of O'Neill's observation. Katauskas describes the life of the freelance cartoonist, working to varying news cycles, for varying rates of pay, and without the luxury of a regular space to build a style and relationship with an audience. That she is both female and young provides a notable contrast with the greying male ranks of the established cartoonists in dailies. She puts this down more to the narrowing of opportunities in a print media shrinking since the 1960s and 1970s, when most of the established Australian

cartoonists got their start, than to any continuing chauvinism within the media or political satire. Whether this provides much comfort when the jobs dry up and the rent needs to be paid, she feels, is moot.

While a spirit of celebration pervades many of the chapters, there is often also a sense of foreboding for many that the freedom of speech exercised so appealingly by cartoonists is under pressure. Maybe that is because they are becoming one of the last redoubts for undisciplined, unspun commentary in a media increasingly managed by the simultaneous rise of public relations and a fear of terrorist attack. Some might argue that the powers that be should be able to demand loyalty in time of a war against terror. We don't agree, however, that the nation is made safer by limiting the organs of dissent. We hope that this book's exploration of what cartoons are and how they work provides useful evidence to support this case.

Any competent newspaper editor knows that a cartoonist's only real responsibility is to be funny and interesting without breaking any laws. Disciplining them to an editorial line or a narrow sense of decorum defeats the purpose of having cartoons in the paper. It ensures that they fail both as amusement for readers and as (sporadically prophetic) satirical commentary. The great New Zealand-born cartoonist David Low even managed to get himself onto the Gestapo's hit-list after the invasion of England by dint of his cartoons attacking Hitler in the 1930s. No amount of Foreign Office pressure on the *Evening Standard* could get him to tone them down. Lord Beaverbrook sometimes cajoled his star (nearly always unsuccessfully) to tone things down, but he never ordered or sacked him; history vindicated the judgment of both.

The last Australian media proprietor to direct a cartoonist to a topic was Frank Packer back in the 1940s, and the cartoonist, Will Mahoney, preferred to be sacked rather than follow orders. Such fearlessness is now the stuff of legend, and the independence of the cartoonist is widely accepted in Western nations. This doesn't mean that newspapers must accept whatever cartoon their artist offers. That would amount to the same level of unqualified privilege enjoyed by members of parliament. Editors can nag cartoonists, refuse particular cartoons, and sack recalcitrants. This is all perfectly sensible and legitimate, but it's also a slippery slope of pressure that must be constantly negotiated. Ian Mathews remarks on the

balancing act required by editors when it comes to publishing cartoons. On the one hand, it was one of the great pleasures of his job as editor of the *Canberra Times* during the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, he explains how editors sometimes have to encourage the cartoonists to use metaphors like Pinocchio's nose rather than a detailed and direct bluntness that might get them into trouble. As a consequence of basic caution, cartoons can be a means for saying things journalists and columnists dare not risk for fear of defamation charges.

The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Alan Moir provides something between a historical account and a manifesto on the rights of cartoonists as he sees and practises them. In doing so, he opens the grey area of informal pressures, one that will warrant further investigation by academics. He explains that, except for 'notional lines of defamation law and of "taste"', cartoonists rarely experience censorship but he notes instances where attempts were made from high political office to censor. He provides a wonderful story from early in his career when he worked for Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*. During the Bjelke-Petersen era, the then Deputy Premier, Lew Edwards, directed the Queensland Solicitor-General to threaten the newspaper with legal action following a cartoon which implied that the government 'might be dishonest'. Cartoonist and newspaper called Edwards's bluff, were not sued, and lived long enough to be vindicated by the Fitzgerald Report of the late 1980s. This points to an interesting fact that the actual state of Australia's laws of defamation and sedition as they relate to cartoons have never been properly tested in the courts. In practice, cartoonists appear to enjoy a functional immunity from prosecution and Elizabeth Handsley and Robert Phiddian, in the most comprehensive account and interpretation yet attempted, argue that this de facto immunity very probably mirrors the legal status of cartoons if any offended party ever brought a case to court.

A cartoon can be a very emotive thing. So far as one can tell from Electoral Commission surveys, individual cartoons by Leunig or Tandberg have been about as insignificant in directly shifting votes as individual opinion pieces by Robert Manne, Piers Ackerman, Paul Kelly, or Andrew Bolt. But over time they mark the ethos of the papers they appear in just as strongly, and colour the views of those who choose to be regular readers. Michael Hogan puzzles over how we might attempt to measure the cartoon's power to shape opinion

and proffers three hypotheses. The one he most supports suggests that ‘cartooning affects the way we think about politicians in general, and the craft of politics in particular’. This worries him because he sees public cynicism toward the political class encouraged by cartoons’ constant lampooning of leaders, ministers and their parties’ machinations—‘Whereas print journalists will occasionally give credit to politicians or political parties for good ideas or good administration, it is almost impossible to find a positive image of politicians or politics in Australian cartooning.’ Even if you take a more sanguine view of cartoons’ influence on the body politic, it is well worth considering the nature of their impact. For example, during 2006 in the *Australian*, Bill Leak cartooned strongly in tune with that paper’s crusade against the maintenance of remote Aboriginal communities. This was just a coincidence of view, and Leak is often at odds with his paper’s editorial line, but the coincidence was remarkably powerful. It became very hard for a consistent reader of that paper to resist the overall argument that remote communities are beastly. The emotive effect was well in excess of the real evidence advanced.

When the editors started formally studying political cartoons back in 1996, it looked to some (including us) like a beautifully designed research project, almost the academic equivalent of goofing off. Now it’s becoming clear to us that there’s much more to the issues involved than that. Cartoons are the hub of the surviving anti-spin and shaming devices in the mainstream media at a time when spin and shamelessness are a ballooning element in public life. Think of everything from *Big Brother* to the Australian Wheat Board inquiry, from Shane Warne to weapons of mass destruction: even when people ‘accept responsibility’ for misconduct these days, they do so as a damage containment measure, never as a prelude to resignation or serious restitution. Cartoons are among the most prominent shaming mechanisms still extant in our public life and have increasingly been at the heart of storms over free speech and the pressure from governments, corporations and opinion-makers to control the message.

The clearest recent example has been the response to the Tampa crisis of 2001 and the subsequent incarceration of asylum seekers. Every one of the hundreds of cartoons we have seen on the topic (in tabloid and broadsheet, metropolitan and regional papers) has advocated more humane treatment for refugees, and none has

shown any tolerance of the subtle legalisms spread by ministers and their bureaucrats. Their unanimity clearly had little impact on public opinion, which remained broadly opposed to ‘illegal immigrants’. Still, cartoonists were quite the most ungovernable part of the media on this topic, and remain so. At the very least, they provided support and consolation to those opposed to the policy and its media-managed execution. Of the four cartoon elections the editors have covered in detail, 2001 was the most remarkable, but all the campaigns are memorable for some of their best cartoons. Haydon Manning surveys campaign cartoons over recent decades, from 1983 to 2004, to show what a rich shorthand for political history they can provide. With some lines and a few words, we are instantly back in the midst of the conflicts and personalities of the day.

Marian Sawyer’s and Haydon Manning’s chapters analyse the role of cartoons in wider themes of political life, political activism and the slow infiltration of women into senior political positions. Sawyer focuses on the presence of cartoons in government documents as a means by which the bureaucracy attempts to ‘get their message across in disarming but effective ways’. Her interest in this relatively recent extension of cartooning derives from a keenness to consider how the influence of new social movements on government policy is practically manifested in brochures and policy booklets concerning social equity and human rights. While a contrast of the largely hostile depiction of women in the early twentieth century suffragist movement shows that cartoons are not inevitably aligned with the egalitarian angels, Sawyer argues that the great virtue of cartooning for equality in government documents lies with the ‘power of visual humour to promote their message, otherwise often in danger of disappearing under government speak’. It is hard to describe this result as anything other than a good thing for cartoons to do, but Manning looks to see whether there might be a darker side to cartooning in the stereotypes it tends to employ and maintain. He picks up a controversy started in 1999 by then Labor Party Deputy Leader, Jenny Macklin, where she claimed that women politicians are typically depicted by male editorial cartoonists as female sexual stereotypes rather than as ‘the politician that is the woman’. He then examines the defence cartoonist, Bill Leak, mounted on behalf of his brethren, and the debate over what is socially acceptable caricature when applied to female political leaders. At face value it’s not difficult to see how some cartoons

drew the ire of feminists, but Manning's analysis argues strongly for the view that women politicians were not demeaned in any more sexist a manner than their male colleagues. Certainly they were demeaned within the rules of the cartooning game, but they were not systematically presented in sexist stereotypes or as interlopers into an essentially male sphere.

Australians often congratulate themselves for having the best cartoonists in the world. As political cartooning is intrinsically a parochial art, in that the audience needs to know the context well enough to identify the figures and events represented, world champion status seems remarkably hard to determine. Guy Hansen is a senior curator at the National Museum of Australia who has put together annual exhibitions of cartoons since the early 1990s. He responds when confronted, as he often is, with the 'best in the world' assessment, that it's better to say that Australian cartoonists are the best at being Australian cartoonists. The underlying assumption here is that they should be valued for what they say to and about us, not because of any essentially unverifiable international ranking. It is, indeed, remarkable how little curatorial and scholarly attention has been paid to Australian cartoons of the last half century, a period of remarkable achievement that invites comparison with the glory days of the *Bulletin* from the 1890s onwards. Hansen's chapter describes his experience in collecting cartoons from recent decades for a major national institution, and explores just what about the national life he is attempting to capture in doing so. He also broaches the debate about whether cartoons should be viewed as art objects or as political commentary. Are they black-and-white art or convenient packaging for fish and chips? It's not really a resolvable issue, but it is interesting to think through how different the cartoons we read on newsprint over breakfast become when hung on a wall in a gallery.

Not only does Australia have patchy collections of cartoon originals (and no database of current cartoons to match the British and North American digital collections), but we are also ill-provided with historical accounts of cartoonists and their impact during recent decades. Three chapters in this collection seek to address this gap and, while none claims to be giving the full story of political cartooning in Australia since Menzies's retirement, they all point to the same moment of conception for a new and revolutionary approach to cartooning, the founding of the *Australian* as Australia's

first national daily paper in 1964 and the appointment of Bruce Petty as its first editorial cartoonist. It is one of the ironies of history that the present widespread assumption in this country that cartoonists will almost automatically be 'of the left' can trace what validity it has to Rupert Murdoch's gamble on a national newspaper. In the twentieth century before Petty, cartoonists were just as likely to be elegantly conservative like George Molnar at the *Sydney Morning Herald* or borderline fascist like Norman Lindsay and Ted Scorfield in the *Bulletin*, as they were to side with socialism. After (though, of course, only partly because of) Petty and the *Australian*, cartoonists predominantly sided with the libertarian and left-wing critique of politics and society and identified most strongly with the plans and dreams of the Whitlam government. Robert Phiddian's chapter looks in detail at Petty's career up to Sir John Kerr's sacking of Whitlam, and seeks to place an account of cartooning near the centre of cultural and political change in those tumultuous years.

Lindsay Foyle works on a wider canvas, summarising the careers of all the major cartoonists who have worked at the *Australian* since 1964. As a cartoonist at the paper himself, he has had a practitioner's access to knowledge of how employment in the media works, and has been around the traps long enough to have heard a rich array of stories. His scrupulously researched chapter, based on extensive interviews with cartoonists and their editors, is the first longitudinal study we have of cartooning at an Australian daily newspaper, and it shows why there should be more such studies. Just how the role of the cartoonist can reflect a paper's ethos—Petty in the swinging 1960s, Pickering for the oil-shocked polity of the 1970s, Mitchell for the rise of monetarism in the 1980s, and Nicholson and Leak for the schizophrenically postmodern and economically rationalist 1990s—is a rich seam for cultural as well as political history.

Mark Thomas provides something else we should have more of: a comparative study of two major cartoonists. In his chapter, he argues that Bruce Petty is more the 'humanist' cartoonist, while Patrick Cook's cartoons reflect the attitude of an 'ironist'. Categorising cartoonists is fraught with difficulty, but Thomas presents a convincing case that, in general, Petty's work is kinder, gentler and, arguably, more optimistic in temper than Cook, who tends towards the blunt comment and sharp wit aimed at skewering sacred cows. Observing that Petty's 'most characteristic drawings have been extraordinarily complicated, manically convoluted and

absurdly detailed', Thomas explains how making sense of economics, a topic most Australians understandably shy away from, lies at the heart of Petty's oeuvre. While Petty strives to say something objective about economic life, Cook reminds 'his readers that there is no such thing as an objective cartoon'.

Indeed, cartoons are not about balance in anything like the same way journalism is. They are about staging and thinking through conflict, so they remain on the wild frontier of the media, and it seems necessary to conclude this introduction with a reassertion of their value in our increasingly groomed and contained media environment. Political parties and governments have learnt the lessons of Vietnam and Watergate, and corporations the lesson of big tobacco; even the churches are beginning to learn the lesson of the Hollingsworth saga and are selling empty churches to put public relations firms on retainers. We are reaching a stage where the old light bulb joke could be reworked as 'How many investigative journalists does it take to write a story? One, plus 24 public relations officers and four beautifully presented, if mendacious, information packages'. Cartoons are one of the last frontiers for product placement and controlling the message.

The spin doctors out there will have noticed how much cartoonists can add to an argument, how they can broach difficult issues in an image and a few words, how they can ridicule people, attitudes, or even that holy-of-holies, the brand. The public relations professionals are bright, well resourced, and may even now be thinking of ways to cultivate such influential opinion-moulders. Every cartoonist we know is a fierce individualist, positively hostile to being sold a line, but their Achilles' heel is the fear that dogs them all: that the paper will have to run with a blank space where their cartoon should be. Product placement in cartoons? It is disturbingly possible. Let cartoonists and their editors be warned to be on guard, and let us all, as citizens and lovers of political cartoons, ensure that we support them in their daily battle to make our public life just a bit more honest.