

ABSTRACT

While cartoonists at a 'Cartoons for Peace' conference generally claimed that freedom of expression was a byword in their respective newspapers, many, in the same breath, identified the cartoon work of others that they would not dare submit. This divergence, argues the author in this commentary, suggests that cartoon taste and acceptability are based on learned or innate cultural traits and sensibilities and that self-censorship perhaps plays a bigger role in the thinking of cartoonists than many might admit, or even realise. So just as one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter, so the attitudes of cartoonists are likely to have a similar range.

MALCOLM EVANS

Political cartoonist

AS ADVANCES in electronic communication reshape world media dynamics, making thousands of newspaper people—including political cartoonists—redundant, I have been to three recent celebrations of the craft. The first, in the National Library last October, was an exhibition of the works of William Hogarth, regarded as the founding father of political cartooning, where I was teamed with veteran cartoonist Bob Brockie to discuss our work in relation to Hogarth's legacy.¹ The other two were political cartoon festivals, one in Wellington in November and one in France this January, at which invited cartoonists from around the world exhibited their work and spoke of their experiences.

Few could read when William Hogarth's images first hit the streets of 17th century England and their graphic depiction of contemporary social issues, which were sold for pennies at the print shop door, were eagerly seized upon. It wasn't till later, when the first publishers saw the potential of cartoons to draw readers to their fledgling publications, that the cartoonists connection with news publishing became commonplace. Though literacy was rising, still the ability to condense words into an easily understood graphic was appreciated. Political cartooning was on its way as all over the world the new medium dissected social issues.

Over the years, from the White House to Whitehall, from St Peters to St Petersburg, the power of the cartoon has been felt. Political cartoons were called ‘the flying leaves of the Revolution’ at the time of the 1789 French Revolution. And Boss Tweed, a corrupt New York politician of the late 1800s, famously wailed: ‘Stop those damned pictures!’ when Thomas Nast’s cartoons exposed his activities.

New Zealander David Low’s work, warning of the rise of fascism, so disturbed the Nazis that his employer was urged to do something about his cartoonist, and also about a writer who was then penning an anti-German column for the paper. Lord Beaverbrook kept Low on but sacked the writer—and, at that time, an out-of-work politician named Winston Churchill.

Following the Hogarth exhibition, Wellington staged the 10th international ‘Cartooning for Peace’ festival, with cartoonists from Turkey, Belgium, Israel, Algeria, Holland, France the US, Japan, the UK, Switzerland, Malaysia, Singapore and Oceania invited.

Kenyan Godfrey Mwampembwa couldn’t attend because a national holiday, called to mark the US Presidential election success of Senator Barack Obama, meant the passport office was closed when he went to get his stamped.

Dominion Post cartoonist Tom Scott opened the week-long event with a panel discussion on issues that affect cartoonists generally. And prominent in the exhibition were cartoons addressing the continuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, a theme that also dominated their discussions and debates. Given that my cartoons on that subject had resulted in my dismissal from the *New Zealand Herald* (Evans, 2004) it was perplexing that my work was somehow misplaced when the Wellington exhibition was being set up.²

Still I was able to show my work in the debates and where I was opposed by Israeli cartoonist Michel Kichka. Cartooning for Peace was launched at the UN in 2006, and is the combined brainchild of Jean Plantu, a cartoonist with *Le Monde* for the past 30 years, and former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Exhibitions in Europe, the Middle East and the United States have been staged since its inception, and the Wellington event was a rare chance for locals to meet and exchange ideas with others of their global fraternity.

The exhibition also included a set of cartoons by David Low, and a discussion on his work and influence was the topic of the first seminar. Moderated by former curator of the NZ Cartoon Archive Susan Foster, it was

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led by expat New Zealander, now Australian, cartoonist Alan Moir, an authority on Dunedin-born Low. Panelists were cartoonists Vadot from Belgium, Morin (US), Tom Scott and me. As well as many of his best-known wartime cartoons, Low's other works showed his concern for the prospects of a post-war peace, including cartoons highlighting the inherent injustices he saw in the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.



DAVID LOW

'Triumph—and defeat'

Other public presentations at *Cartooning for Peace* included discussions on censorship, cultural and societal taboos and constraints, freedom of expression, the global financial crisis, terrorism, and climate change. Many cartoons in the exhibition, and some which were presented at the daily public screenings, included images and ideas that challenged accepted norms. Cartoons that might not be acceptable in New Zealand sat alongside local work which it was said wouldn't be acceptable abroad.

Explicit images on gender and sexual themes raised some Kiwi eyebrows, while the raw political comment shocked others. One cartoonist's work might have caused a diplomatic incident if its explicit nature had been seen at the border.

Discussing editors' concerns, Plantu showed a cartoon of little naked (he pronounced it 'knackered') people involved in some harmless activity, from which he'd had to delete a drip coming from a man's penis, before it could be published.

And Alan Moir said two dots, which he'd drawn for nipples on the breasts of a naked lady, were required to be removed before a cartoon of his could be published.

While the cartoonists generally claimed that freedom of expression was a byword in their respective newspapers, many, in the same breath, identified the cartoon work of others that they would not dare submit.

This divergence suggests that cartoon taste and acceptability are based on learned or innate cultural traits and sensibilities and that self-censorship perhaps plays a bigger role in the thinking of cartoonists than many might admit, or even realise.

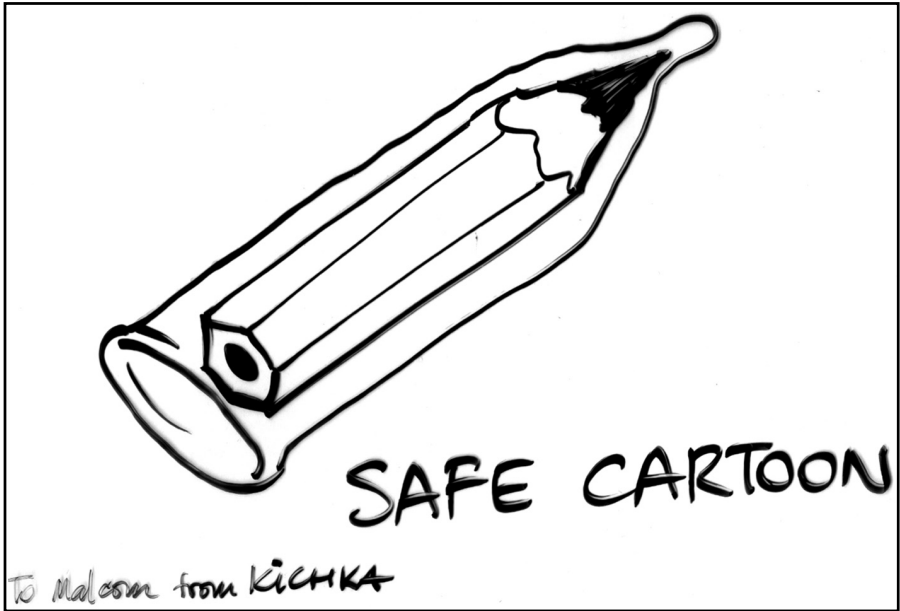
So just as one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter, so the attitudes of cartoonists are likely to similarly range.

Ironically, while otherwise presenting the United States as the last bastion of free speech, the Pulitzer prize-winning US cartoonist Jim Morin identified more cartoons than most as works which would not be acceptable in his Miami-based newspaper *Miami Herald*.

Nationally-syndicated Queenstown cartoonist Garrick Tremain observed that cartoons of his which dealt with 'race' always found less favour the further north they were published, while the reverse was true for his more 'saucy' gags.

Coincidentally the French Cartoon Festival, in Carquefou, just outside Nante, was also the tenth to be staged there and also involved Jean Plantu and his Cartoonists for Peace initiative. Reflecting a greater European interest in cartooning as an art form, than is usual in New Zealand, the French festival was staged by the town of Carquefou as one of its municipal promotional initiatives.

As in Wellington, each invited cartoonist's travel and accommodation expenses were paid for by the organisers of the festival. And again the



A personal cartoon for Malcolm Evans drawn at the 'Cartoons for Peace' conference in Wellington, 2008.

debate that drew most attention was on the subject of Israel and again, as in Wellington, I was opposed in the debate by Israeli cartoonist Michel Kichka.

In Wellington, we had agreed to disagree on our respective views on the Middle East conflict but at the debate in Carquefou France, after Israel's most recent bloody attack on the inhabitants of Gaza, the gloves were off.

Distilling the activities of Popes, politicians or potentates into a simple graphic can be a dangerous business and many cartoonists have paid dearly for their derisive jibes. Incidentally, in 1925, long before Danish cartoonists offended Islam, David Low was the target of Muslim displeasure when he drew *The Prophet* in a cartoon intended to promote the prowess of an English cricketer. The Calcutta correspondent of the *Morning Post* reported that many Muslims in India were 'convulsed in speechless rage'.

In more recent times, the Turkish cartoonist Aydin has chalked up nine court appearances, and has spent eight months in jail, while his colleague Erkanli has served 10 months behind bars. Dissident South Korean cartoon artist Hong Song-dam was sentenced to seven years for a graphic mural he did.

South African cartoonist Zapiro, was imprisoned for six weeks, on suspicion of planning a 70th birthday celebration for the then—imprisoned Nelson Mandela, and subsequently spent the next few years working underground.

Cartoonists at the Cartoon Festival in France reported having been similarly threatened. An Iranian said he'd been five times before the courts and once imprisoned. He now works from the relative safety of Canada.

Two other cartoonists, from Colombia and the Cameroon respectively, have resorted to producing their own newspapers to get their work published! The pendulum, for them at least, appears to have swung back to Hogarth.

In 1992, Iranian cartoonist Manouchehr Karimzadeh, was sentenced to 50 lashes, a year in prison and a hefty fine for a cartoon he'd drawn. And upon release he was re-tried and had an additional 10-year sentence imposed. His cartoon had drawn attention to the poor state of soccer in Iran.

In 1993, the Saudi Arab News ran the US strip cartoon BC, in which the main character was drawn calling to the clouds: 'God if you're up there give me a sign.' And the next panel showed him showered with a bucket of garbage. This resulted in the paper's editor being sentenced to two years in prison and 500 lashes, while the editor-in-chief received one year and 300 lashes.

In 2007, a Bangladeshi cartoonist was jailed for a month when the government claimed his drawings had insulted Muslims, and in Athens in 2003, cartoons illustrating a satirical view of the life of Jesus resulted in an Australian cartoonist receiving a six month sentence.

But some cartoonists have paid the ultimate price.

Naji el-Ali, an exiled Palestinian living in London, drew cartoons that highlighted the plight of Palestinians and spoke out against terrorism, and he also attacked Arab governments for their lack of democracy. He was shot in the head on his way to work in Chelsea, having earlier been warned by a friend in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation that his life was in danger.

And in 1999 two cartoonists in Algeria were killed, one by a car bomb and the other by gunmen who abducted him.

Still cartoonists gaily repeat the old axiom—'as long as someone's complaining, we're doing our job'. Nevertheless as more and more newspapers fall victim to the electronic media, the question of what makes for a good cartoonist looks ever more likely to soon be irrelevant.



MALCOLM EVANS

Notes

1. At the end of the evening, David Schwartz, a leading member of the New Zealand Zionist community, stood up from the audience and accused me of producing cartoons worthy of *Der Sturmer*, the Nazi propaganda newspaper.
2. This was explained as an oversight, and not related to the content of my work, but the omission had still not been corrected by the time I left for home three days later.

Reference:

Evans, M. (2004). The political cartoonist's right to freedom of expression. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 10(2), 71-80.

Malcolm Evans was twice cartoonist of the New Zealand Herald, totalling 15 years. He twice won the Qantas New Zealand Cartoonist of the Year Award and was twice a finalist. Evans was also inaugural president of the NZ Cartoonists and Illustrators Association.
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