

Cartoonists and Political Cynicism

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ABSTRACT

This article is designed to open up a fairly untested area in the study of politics — asking whether the impact of political cartoons is all benign, or whether an unrelieved diet of negative images may perhaps contribute to the level of cynicism for politics and politicians characteristic of many citizens in modern democracies like Australia. While the structure of the paper makes a number of categorisations of political cartoons, the accompanying discussion is intentionally tentative, posing questions rather than asserting conclusions.

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It is commonplace for writers on democracy to point out that the worst attacks on the system come from its own practitioners, especially politicians themselves. This should not be surprising. Liberal democracy involves numerous competitions for power, and the adjudicators of success and failure are the voters. It is in the interest of those competing for power to blacken the reputation of their rivals. Indeed, the system does not work unless voters are presented with a choice between at least two alternative power seekers, whose job it is to explain why I should vote for this one rather than that. A tendency to encourage some measure of popular cynicism about politicians and politics is built into the democratic system.

Meanwhile, one of the strongest supports for a liberal democratic regime has always been the existence of a free press, able to criticise without fear any shortcomings of governments, oppositions, or individual politicians. Criticism is at the heart of the system. Unfortunately, while this can help to keep politicians honest and accountable, it often has the by-product of increasing levels of cynicism in the electorate. If Jones calls Smith a liar, and Smith responds by calling Jones an incompetent fool, and the mass media suggest that both accusations have some merit, then it will not be surprising if the public develops a perception that politicians in general are a bad lot. In fact, as Australia moves into the twenty-first century, this seems to be the case. As the sub-editors of *Australian Quarterly* commented at the head of a recent symposium: "When it comes to popularity and trust, politicians are down with snake-oil salesmen and Christopher Skase." (*AQ*, 1996, p.16)

The consequences of a high level of cynicism about politicians and the political process are most obviously seen in high levels of abstention from voting. While Australia counters this problem with compulsory voting, many other liberal democratic regimes (notably the United States) experience a level of abstention that may even threaten the legitimacy of governments elected by a minority of the population. In Australia, in recent years, political cynicism has been one of the factors helping to erode popular support for the major political parties, with support going increasingly to independents if not to fringe anti-liberal groups such as One Nation. One alternative to political moderation, when cynicism becomes entrenched, is political extremism.

Clearly, the maintenance of a healthy democracy demands that criticism remain central. Among politicians, negative attacks on rivals are balanced by positive images portrayed about themselves. We must assume that the electors are competent to make reasonable judgements about policy and personality presentations. Similarly, the mass media tends to balance negative and positive images of politicians and policies. Commentators in the press, radio and television tend to find negative and conflictual images more newsworthy than positive ones, (and thus add to the level of cynicism) but, especially at election times, it is normal for them to recommend particular parties, policies or personalities.

This paper suggests that the work of political cartoonists tends to reinforce almost completely the negative images of politics and politicians, with almost no counter-vailing positive images. Depending on how influential we judge such cartoons to be in the formation of popular images of politics (an evaluation of effectiveness is outside the scope of this short paper) this can be a minor or a significant promoter of popular cynicism about politics. My own guess is that cartoons are important in helping to inform the electorate, but I do not want to impose that judgement on readers.

The point here is to provoke questions about the balance, or lack of balance, in the negative and positive images of politics presented by political cartoonists. Throughout the discussion, asking questions is more important than providing a tight empirical argument. The paper is an invitation to readers to look at the cartoons and ask themselves some of the questions posed. Some readers will, I am sure, conclude that I sometimes draw too long a bow in the categories that I use or the assumptions I make. If that provokes a contrary argument, the purpose of the paper will have been achieved.

There is a considerable body of popular journalistic discussion of political cynicism (especially after the recent US presidential election), but the academic literature prefers to discuss the matter in terms used in American political sociology texts' treatment of political participation. One can thus read much more about apathy and alienation than about cynicism. Nevertheless, Clive Bean has used the notion of cynicism to summarise the whole Australian political culture with its popular distrust of state mechanisms. (Bean, 1993, p.58) In an Australian context one of the best recent discussion of some of the themes of this paper can be found in Murray Goot's article, "Keeping the bastards honest", although Goot is more concerned to describe the level of interest, engagement, turnout, and trust in the Australian electorate than to explain who or what is to blame for any deficiencies. (Goot, 1999)

The normal context for studying the impact of different institutions on public opinion has been the vast literature on the mass media. However, the discussion of political cynicism is only a minor theme. A recent article in an American electronic journal puts the argument for a causal relationship succinctly:

Most people know that we live in an age of political cynicism. It's not difficult to see why. The media treats politics like a national sport, spotlighting scandals, telling the nation who "won" this week, and reducing political analysis to the thumbs up - thumbs down style used by movie critics. The result is that, so far as the media is concerned, politics has become an extension of the entertainment industry. (Avram, 1999)

One of the fundamental questions to be asked is about the nature of political cynicism itself and how it should be evaluated in contemporary Australia. One possible response is that the level of political cynicism at present is perfectly healthy.

While I do not share that opinion, I invite readers to ponder the question while they view the cartoons and read the commentary.

There is considerable discussion of political cartooning in various media. Probably the most extensive study is a history of political cartooning in the USA (Ness & Northrop, 1996), although there are a number of collections of Australian cartooning with some commentary. (Mahood, 1973; Lindsay, 1979; King, 1976) Some publications are meant as accompaniments to temporary exhibitions of cartoons (Kerr, 1999; Times Newspaper, 1970). However, almost all discussion tends to focus on artistic values and cultural context rather than the political impact. In New Zealand, one of the regular Hocken Lectures addressed some of the issues involved in the artist's choice of targets. (Seymour-Ure, 1996) In Ann Turner's interviews with modern Australian cartoonists, one of the issues is the question of censorship, which is related to a discussion of political impact. (Turner, 2000) Another notable exception to this generalisation is the groundbreaking chapter by Haydon Manning and Robert Phiddian on cartooning during the 1998 federal election. (Manning & Phiddian, 2000) The authors argue that political satire "went into partial eclipse" during that election campaign. They tend to suggest that any increase in levels of cynicism is the fault of the politicians themselves, and that more cartoons with a sharper critical edge would benefit the political system. This article builds on that foundation, extends the discussion to look more deliberately at the consequences rather than the characteristics of satirical popular drawings, and in passing engages with the argument of Manning and Phiddian.

The Database

The database of political cartoons used for this argument comprises 50 cartoons commenting on New South Wales electoral politics spread through the twentieth century. They were collected for the preparation of an extended study of NSW electoral politics, illustrated with over 500 cartoons by about 80 different artists. (Hogan & Clune, 2001) The fact that the database contains more cartoons from the second half of the century than from the first reflects the more common use later in the century of simple line drawings that are easier to reproduce than some of the earlier drawings. (Norman Lindsay's wonderful drawings are among the most acid political commentaries from the first half of the century, but they do not reproduce well from the faded pages of the old *Bulletin*.)

The database does represent common tendencies throughout the century, with the exceptions mentioned later in this discussion (especially about the impact of crises such as war and economic depression on the images of politics). It is not appropriate to make any claims that the cartoons are a "representative sample" in any scientific sense. The complete file of 500+ cartoons were chosen simply to illustrate important aspects and issues in NSW politics at each stage of the century under review, with the

only qualification being the ease of reproduction. Readers are invited to examine them all in the three-volume published work and make a judgement about any perceived bias. The sample of approximately ten percent used in this database was chosen to illustrate this paper, and so there is clearly a leaning towards the more explicit and institutional aspects of cynicism. Yet it would have been possible to have chosen 50 completely different cartoons for the same purpose. To test the representativeness of the images and categories used in this discussion, readers are encouraged to view another database of Australian cartoons — 83 drawings, all from 1999 — that can be examined on the Web. (National Museum of Australia, 2000) More importantly, readers are invited to compare the examples used here with their own experience. The cartoons in the database can be viewed online at *The Drawing Board's* website, <http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/drawingboard/>.

The Savage Pen

Virtually all the 500 cartoons used in *The People's Choice* are critical of politicians. Sometimes the image used can be particularly savage, and often an independent observer would judge the image used to be unfair to the politician concerned. The question I wish to ask here is whether the same criteria of balance and avoidance of bias should apply to cartoonists as are regularly demanded of journalists who use words and graphic images in their stories or commentaries. Should cartoonists be accorded extra licence? It is not immediately obvious to me why they should be. Is their function fundamentally different from that of journalists — that cartoonists should be able to lampoon mercilessly, while journalists should beware — or is the cartoonist simply a journalist who uses visual humour?

The few examples in the database where individual politicians are presented in a positive light fit into recognisable categories that do not support an argument of “balanced” graphic reporting of politicians. The most common case is where the victor in an election campaign is portrayed as the “winner”; but there is always the image of the other “loser” to more than balance the image. So, for example, in 1981 Neville Wran is portrayed as a bloated superman, while the unfortunate Liberal leader, Bruce McDonald, is being swallowed alive (see cartoon number 17 in the database). It hardly boosts the overall image of politicians. The other common category is plainly partisan. The image of anti-Lang Labor figure, Robert Heffron, shown below taking off his coat to clean up the Labor Party headquarters after the defeat of Lang in 1938 (12) seems strong and virtuous, but it was blatant propaganda on the part of the *Labor Daily*, controlled at that time by Heffron supporters. In previous years, when the *Labor Daily* had been controlled by Lang himself, the graphic portrayals of Lang were no less partisan. Wherever the organs of political parties have used cartoonists (and it just happens that that has been more common on the Labor Party side) the portrayals of their leaders have tended to be hagiographic and non-critical. It is unlikely that such images have had much impact on anyone other than on the true believers of the relevant political parties.



Coats Off For The Clean-up

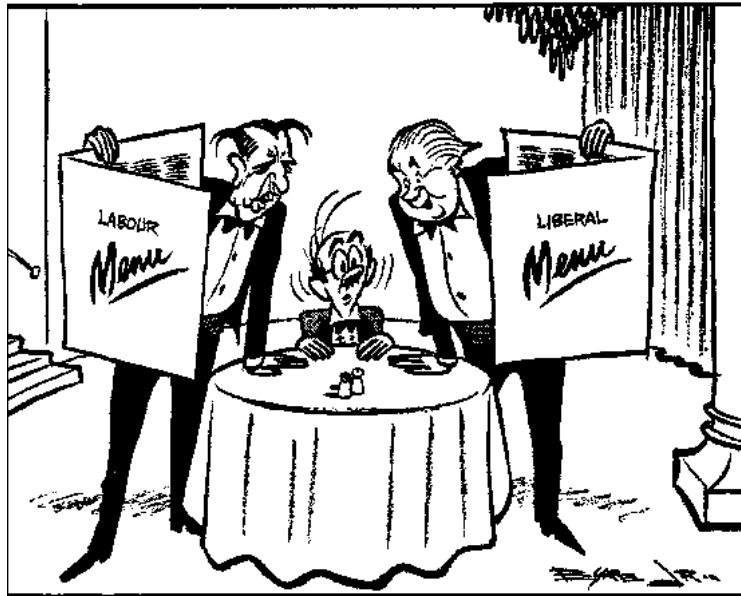
Will Mahony, Labor Daily, 29 March 1938

The categories of cartoons presented here provide evidence of tendencies beyond the criticism of individual persons, parties or policies. This is not something that is necessarily dysfunctional for a healthy democracy. It is possible to contemplate criticism, and the presentation of negative images, of the democratic system itself, that is entirely justified. Not even its most fervent advocates will argue that the system of liberal democracy is perfect or beyond criticism. When journalists (text or graphic) criticise individual politicians, parties, or policies, they tend to give implied support for the alternatives — rival politicians, parties or policies. However, when they criticise the system itself, is more care needed, because the implied alternative may sometimes involve abandoning rather than reforming the system?

Tweedledum and Tweedledee

The most common theme in NSW electoral cartoons over the whole period from 1901 to the election of 1999 was that there was little to choose between the candidates, policies or parties. Variations of this idea can be found in every election, and sometimes became the dominant theme in the graphic portrayal of an individual

election campaign. (A fair sample can be reviewed in the following examples in the database: 01, 04, 06, 07, 09, 20, 21, 25, 26, 30, 33, 34, 43, 44, 47.) Sometimes, as in Eyre Jr.'s cartoon of Labor's Renshaw opposing the Liberal Party's Askin in 1965, (28) this was fair comment. There was very little to choose between the two in terms of policies. (The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Eyre Jr. had a particular liking for this theme; he used variations of that same cartoon in almost every election he covered.) However, this was not the case portrayed in the two "Minties" cartoons where Jack Lang was confronted by Thomas Bavin and Billy Hughes in 1930 or Bertram Stevens in 1932, in the context of the first two State elections of the Great Depression. (The "Minties" cartoons are 06 and 07.) There has rarely been the presentation of a more radical choice to the Australian electorate than in those elections, and to suggest that there was little to choose between the candidates points to a very strange view of electoral politics.



"Ignore him, sir, he'll send you broke!"

Eyre Jr., *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April 1965

It is worth pausing to consider some of the political implications of the "Tweedledum-Tweedledee" image. In cases such as the Eyre Jr. cartoon above, the artist's political comment is critical of the major parties for not presenting a genuine policy choice to the electors. This is not only fair, but the comment is supportive of electoral democracy in general, since a reasonable argument can be made that elections will be better manifestations of liberal democracy if they present electors with real choices. However, not all examples of this genre are so ideologically benign. Where the artist is implying that there is no choice, not because political leaders have been remiss in this particular instance, but because the system, and/or its participants, are fundamentally worthless, then the extended use of such images is

likely to promote cynicism about the political process. Cartoons are usually meant to be funny, even if in a black kind of way, and the occasional cynical cartoon can bring a smile and foster worthwhile reflection about the democratic values of the political system. However, when the negative images become the normal fare, then the joke may cease to be funny. There are a number of categories, discussed below, where the graphic political comment goes further than encouraging a genuine choice between candidates and policies.

Promises are Lies

There are many examples of cartoons implying that election promises are lies. Jack Quayle's *Bulletin* cartoon shown here (23) is a generic version, but more pointed examples can be seen throughout the database. (See: 01, 18, 22, 25, 31, 34, 38, 46.)



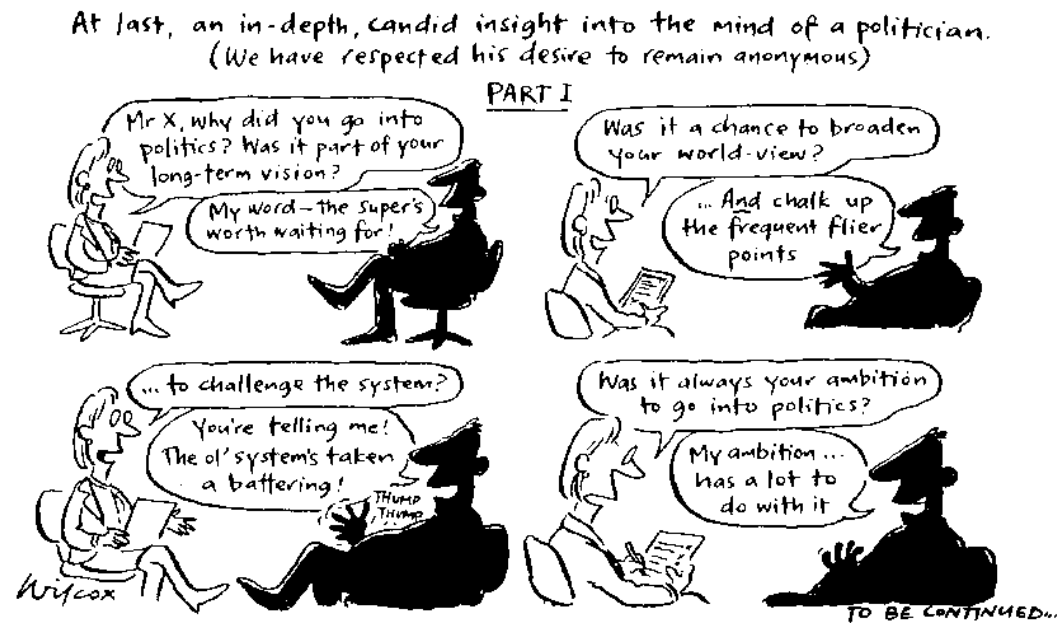
Jack Quayle, *Truth*, 19 February 1956

The fact that many citizens will accept such a statement without demur is more an indication that the negative propaganda has been successful than that the statement is true. Some politicians undoubtedly tell lies (some even boast in their autobiographies that lying is justified), but there is little evidence that electoral promises are lies. A much better explanation for the many promises that remain unfulfilled after an election is that the politicians or parties concerned have had to

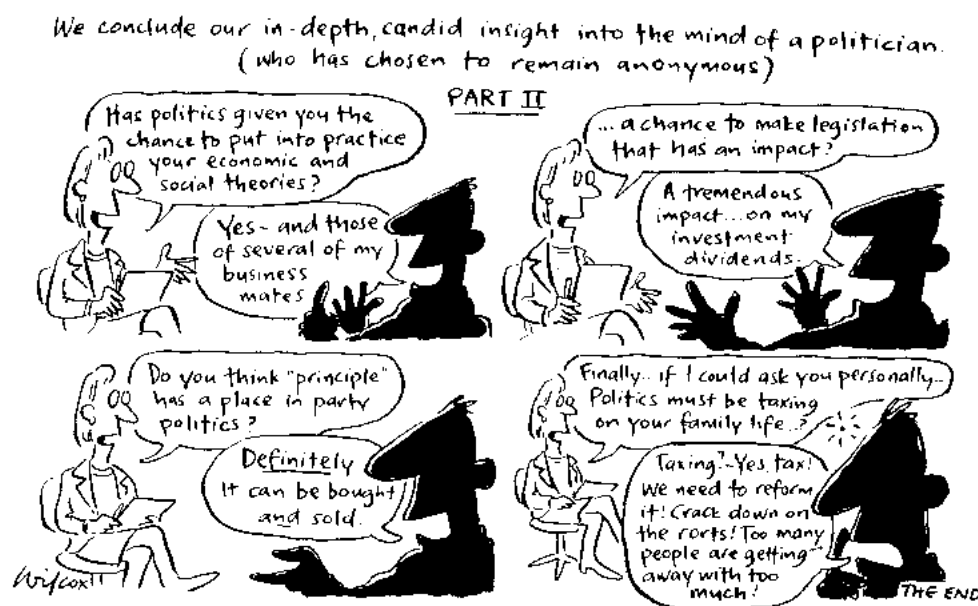
confront economic and political realities when they are in office that they did not appreciate when they were in electioneering mode. It is thus a proper democratic role of cartoonists to caution electors about foolhardy, uncosted, ill-considered, and even dangerous promises. However, a blanket, and endemic, message that all politicians are lying when they make promises threatens to damage the fundamental trust in the people’s representatives that underlies the democratic system. Certainly, the mass media, and political cartoonists, need to scrutinise both politicians and their promises. If there are manifest lies, then they need to be exposed. However, if the message that all promises are lies is taken seriously by the electorate (and I stress that word, “IF”), it makes nonsense of the choice offered in supposedly democratic elections, and so threatens one of the pillars of the democratic system itself. This is a great deal more than a bland “Tweedledum and Tweedledee” argument, although it shares the assumption that there is no significant difference between the parties offering themselves to the electorate. If, on the other hand, nobody takes the message of cartoons seriously, then I suspect that the cartoonists themselves will feel that they have failed!

All Politicians are Venal and Corrupt

A further progression from the message that all electoral promises are lies is the argument that all politicians are not only liars, but are concerned only for their own self advancement. This vision of an inherently corrupt profession can be seen very clearly in Cathy Wilcox’s caustic indictment of politicians in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (49 and 50), shown below.



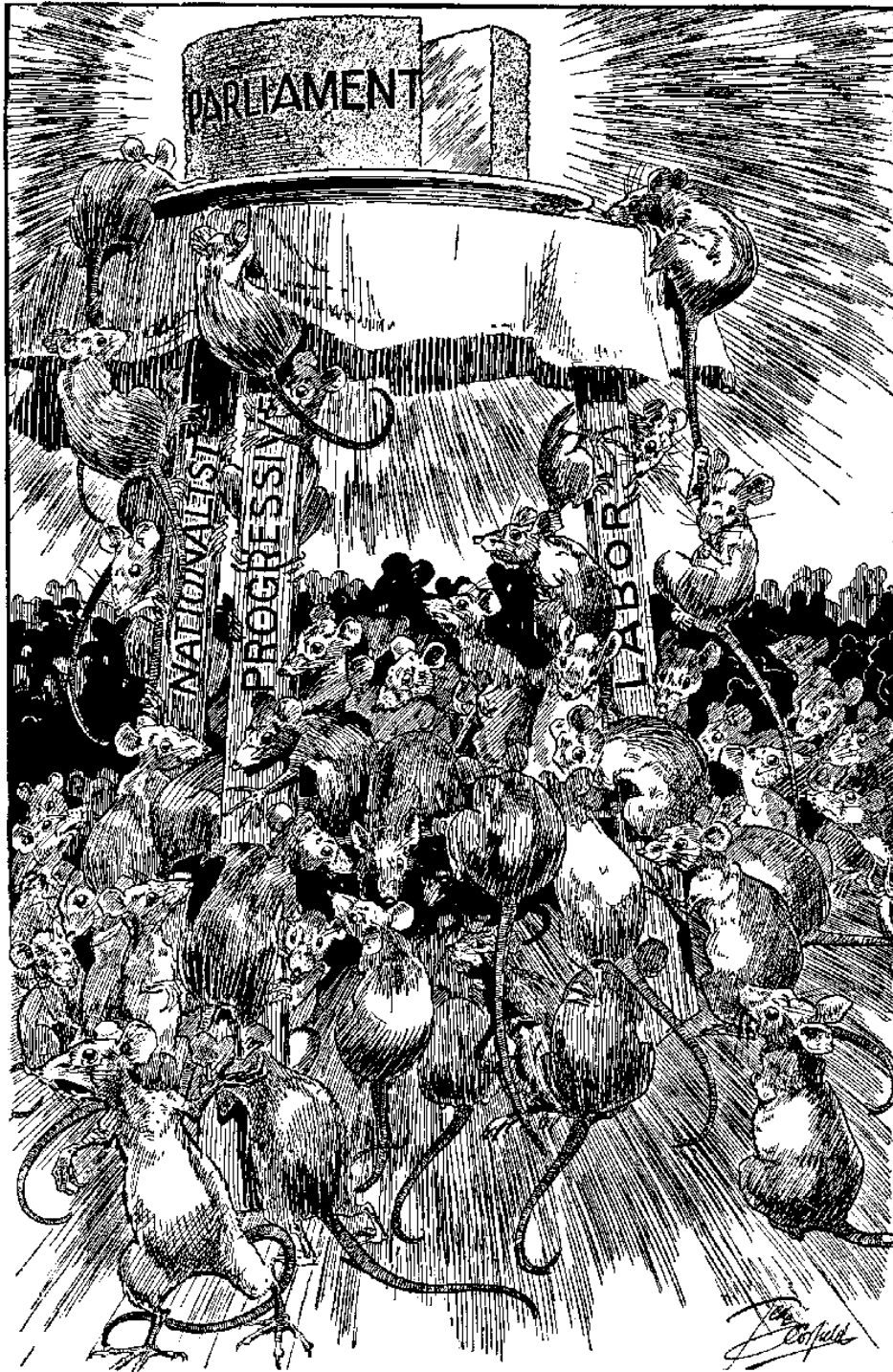
Cathy Wilcox, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 June 1997



Cathy Wilcox, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 June 1997

Admittedly, many similar cartoons have a specific context, when political corruption itself was a real issue in the particular election, as has often been the case. Clearly, some politicians are venal and corrupt. Some have gone to prison; others have been thrown out of office. Nevertheless, the general message that all politicians are corrupt surely demeans the political process itself.

Occasionally, the link between such a message and an assault on the legitimacy of democracy is made more evident by the context. This is the case, for example, with the 1925 *Bulletin* cartoon of Ted Scorfield (05) that presents a pungent image of a plague of rats climbing over each other to reach the parliamentary cheese. Quite explicitly, no distinction is made between candidates for the Nationalist, Progressive, or Labor parties. They are all as bad as each other. Moreover, this drawing came at a time when the same message was being reinforced in the editorial and commentary pages of journals like the *Bulletin*, *Smith's Weekly* and *Truth*, all of which expressed contempt for party politics and politicians. Another example (27) from the *Bulletin* of the 1960s is just as explicit. It was not coincidental that the 1920s was a period when liberal democracy was under concerted attack, especially in Europe, and when various forms of fascism or authoritarianism were being touted as preferable alternatives. The *Bulletin* was not a fascist magazine during the 1920s, but many of its contributors (including some of its cartoonists) clearly were willing to contemplate the substitution of a different political system for what they saw as the discredited and corrupt system of liberal democracy.



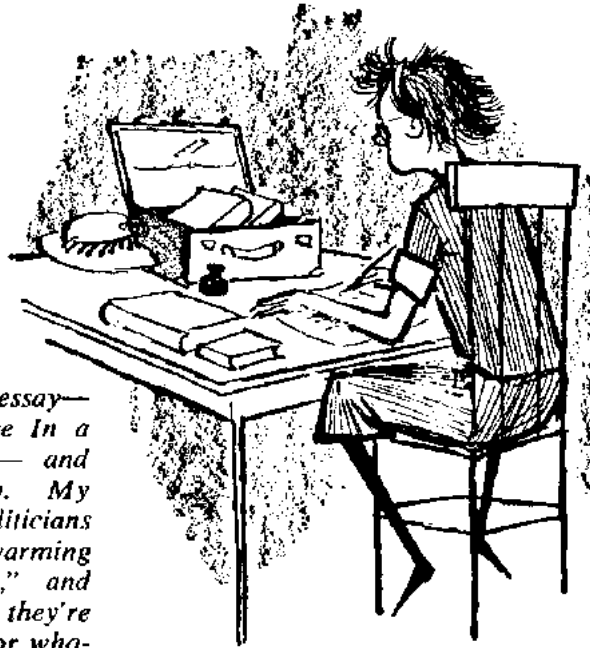
I think I smell cheese!

Ted Scorfield, Bulletin, 21 May 1925

Just as clearly, many ordinary Australians were dissatisfied with the normal conduct of party politics. That was part of the explanation for the extraordinary popular support among working class people for Jack Lang in the late 1920s and early 1930s; he was seen as different from the ordinary politician and prepared to contemplate radical alternatives. Fortunately, neither Lang nor his supporters were willing to contemplate abandoning electoral politics as the basis of an effective political system.

*I am writing an essay—
“The Politician's Place In a
Free Democracy” — and
would like your help. My
daddy says all politicians
“are a useless, seat-warming
bunch of hypocrites,” and
Linda's daddy says they're
“time-serving urchers for who-
ever will give them the
biggest sling.” Which of
these opinions is correct?*

Pep, *Bulletin*, 3 March 1962 (detail)



Voters are Stupid

Elections are contests where the comparative worth of politicians and policies is adjudicated by ordinary people who make up the electorate. If it is a threat to the legitimacy of the system to imply that all politicians are corrupt, isn't it just as much a threat to imply that the voters are incompetent to make such an adjudication? In the history of European fascism such an attack on the worth of voting was one of the main pillars intended to justify putting decision-making firmly into the hands of a more competent elite. Emile Mercier's image shown below (20) is a gently humorous (and misogynist) jibe at the ordinary voter.



Emile Mercier, *Sun*, 17 June 1950

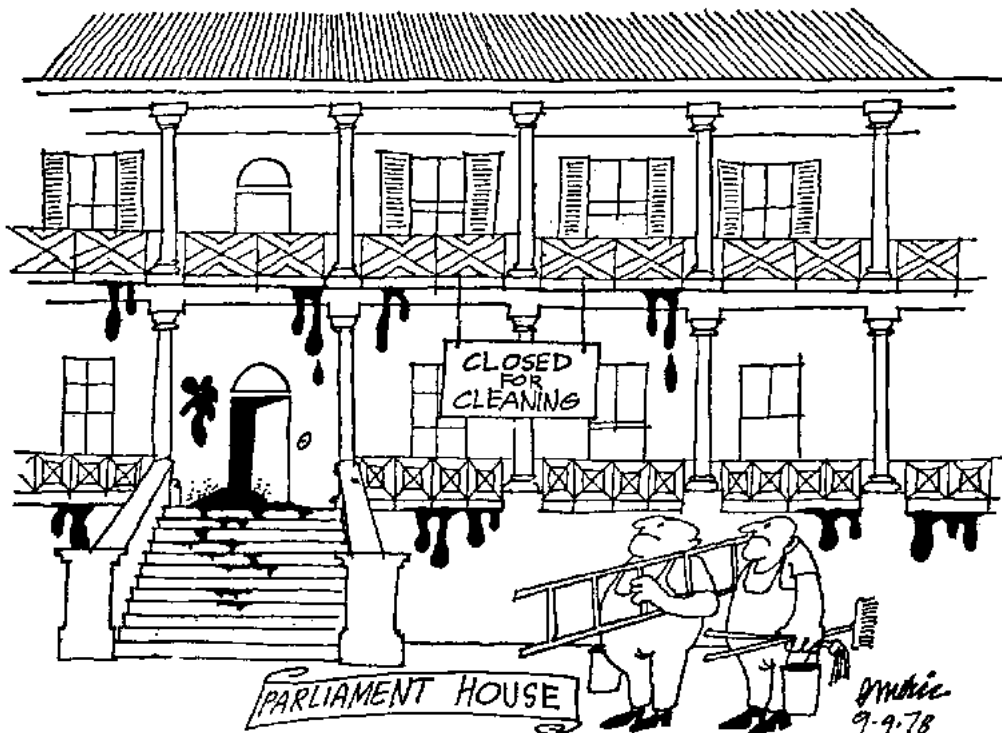
Mercier, one of the most admired Australian cartoonists of the 1950s, almost always chose non-political themes for his drawings (although he contributed a number of cartoons for use in Liberal Party political advertisements in the NSW elections of 1953 — a decision I suspect he later regretted). A similar portrayal of the ordinary voter as “non-political” can be seen in another Mercier cartoon (32). For “non-political” in this context, read apathetic, ignorant or alienated. A later example, again from an artist who often preferred a “non-political” message, can be seen in George Molnar’s 1984 cartoon (39). A more recent example by Peter Nicholson (45) contains the same implication that voters are stupid, but at least his target is a trendy male, rather than the mindless female of some earlier examples.

There is no intention to over-react to this category of cartoons. It is not nearly as pervasive as the image of politicians as corrupt and worthless, and the tendency is for the commentary to be gently ironic, rather than trenchant. There is some fairness in

the portrayal, since indications are that many members of the Australian voting public are unaware and uninterested when it comes to party politics. However, Goot's evidence is that a much larger proportion of the population expresses "a good deal" or "some" interest, compared with those who have "not much" or "none". The ratio over the period from the 1980s to the end of the century has usually been better than four to one. (Goot, 1999, p.18)

Parliament and Elections are a Farce

Politicians in New South Wales have a reputation dating back beyond the 1890s for bringing the institution of Parliament into disrepute. A popular title for the NSW Parliament, dating from that time, the "Bear Pit", is a reference to the abusive language, personal invective, and occasional physical assault that have characterised the conduct of parliamentary business at various times. As with other categories of cartoons discussed here, there is some justification both for the popular title and for cartoons such as that by Emeric shown below (35). Other drawings that give a less than favourable image of the State Parliament and of the electoral process for choosing its members are regular occurrences. (See: 02, 03, 08, 10, 11, 13, 24, 40, 44, 48.) Indeed, most of the examples in other categories mentioned earlier contribute to the same grubby image.



Emeric, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 September 1978

The nature of the mass media certainly contributes to the overwhelmingly negative images of parliamentary affairs in textual or visual commentary. Conflict is newsworthy, while reasoned debate often has to take second place. It is of no avail for education officers of the Parliament, conducting children around the building, to point out the vast amount of parliamentary business conducted without acrimony and with remarkable effectiveness over the last century and a half of the NSW democratic Parliament. For most visitors to the Parliament the interesting bit is to watch Question Time when the politicians insult one another! In this respect cartoonists are simply reflecting the negative images of Parliament that seem to be dominant in the general community. Nevertheless, if they have any impact on public opinion, they are also reinforcing them.

In this example, it is clear that there is a lack of balance in the presentation of images of Parliament. I can't recall ever having seen even one cartoon commenting on any level of politics that gives a positive image of an Australian Parliament! Yet parliamentarism is surely at the heart of day-to-day democracy, and thus should merit respect. But what is a cartoonist to do? The genre depends upon finding images that are humorous, critical, and topical. It is hard to imagine a cartoon portraying Parliament or politicians in a "goody-goody" way as finding favour either with journal editors or with the reading public. The unintended consequence of the demands of the genre is that the images are overwhelmingly negative and surely contribute to increasing popular cynicism, primarily about politics and politicians, but consequently about the whole democratic regime.

Elections are a Waste of Time

One of the common corollaries of the Tweedledum/Tweedledee portrayal is the implied argument that elections are a waste of time. Whenever the cartoonist provides an image that suggests that the choice being offered to voters is phoney or no real choice, then it begs the response from the voter: "why should I bother voting if it makes no difference or merely confirms one set of scoundrels over another?" Some of the cartoons in the database, such as the Eyre Jr. drawing from 1956 shown below (24), clearly go further than the harmless portrayal of two sides with similar policies. The database contains numerous examples of a similar nature where the choice offered is rather more loaded. (See: 01, 04, 09, 22, 25, 27, 38, 40, 41, 42, 44, 48.) The suggestion seems to be that whoever you vote for, a politician (that is, probably a scoundrel) will always win. There are no balancing cartoons (outside completely partisan journals) pointing out how worthy the candidates are or how important it is that the correct choices be made.

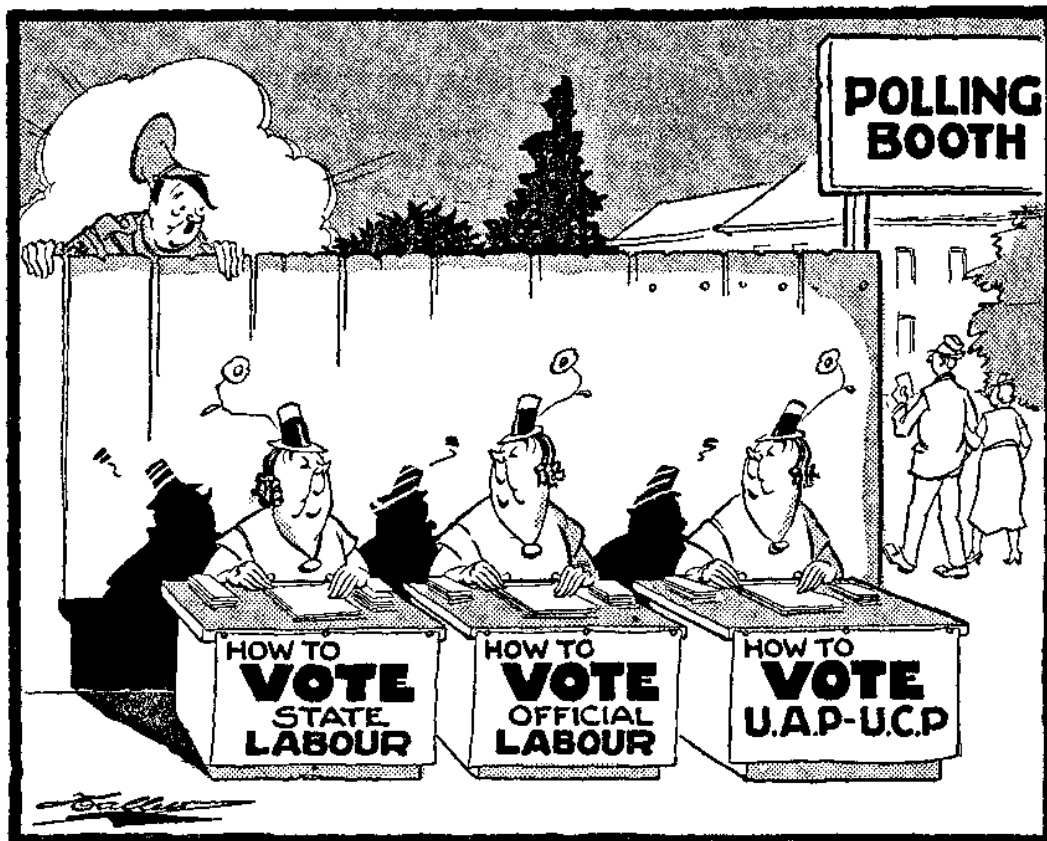


"I said this'd be a good time to take a nice quiet driving trip or something!"

Eyre Jr., *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 1956

Elections are Positively Evil

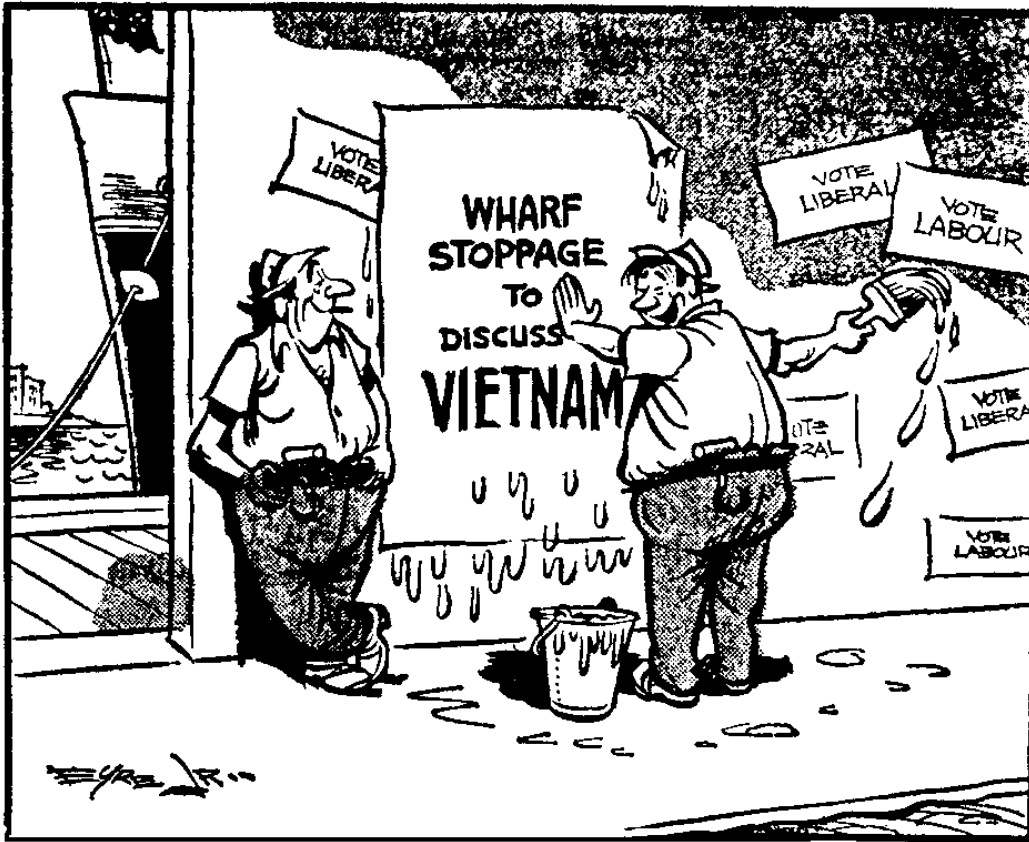
At first sight, the Hallett cartoon shown below (16), implying that a normal State election is serving the interests of totalitarianism, seems completely outrageous. However, there are a number of points that need to be made. Even though that image is the clearest portrayal available of the evil impact of elections it is by no means the only one. (See 14, 15, and to a lesser extent, 09 and 10.) The qualification is that such drawings tend to be confined to times of obvious national crisis such as major wars and the Great Depression. In 1941 the argument behind the cartoon was that in a time of such crisis the parties should cooperate, not compete. In both world wars and in the Depression there were frequent calls at Commonwealth and State level for elections to be postponed and for the main parties to agree to form some kind of government of national salvation. Even though such suggestions are understandable in times of national crisis, the underlying assumption — that competitive politics does not serve the interests of the community and should be replaced by some form of consensus politics — is an attack on the nature of liberal democracy. Both that argument and the images of squabbling, self interested, political parties tend to survive beyond the crisis of the day and become part of the negative background that is the theme of this paper.



HITLER: "That's how I've captured all my victims."

Hallett, *Smith's Weekly*, 3 May 1941

The crises of war and Depression had an impact on the cartoonists' craft in another, and paradoxical, way. At the same time as some images reflected deep-seated criticism of the liberal democratic system, others exhibited a servility to the political regime that is not apparent in less stressed times. Most obvious in journals with a jingoistic and xenophobic tradition, such as, for example, the *Bulletin* in mid-century, were cartoons portraying Australia's enemies as monsters with no positive characteristics. Hitler, the Japanese Emperor, and by association all Germans and Japanese, tended to be portrayed as completely evil. Almost certainly they were mirror images of the graphic portrayal of Allied leaders and people in the German and Japanese popular press. Clearly many cartoonists were, perhaps without realising their predicament, effectively co-opted to the national war effort. While it is almost impossible to find benign images of Australian politicians in wartime, the cartoon portrayal of Australian servicemen and women tends to be positive and affectionate.



"All this silly electioneering — don't they know who runs this country?"

Eyre Jr., *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 April 1965

There is an interesting variant of this pattern relating to the Vietnam War and its impact on Australia. A long-standing Marxist argument about elections is that they merely serve to distract people from appreciating the real source of power in society — the forces of capital. Eyre Jr.'s cartoon shown above (29) turns that argument on its head with the implication that the real rulers of the country are in the trade union movement. Nevertheless, the same assumption about the irrelevance (or worse) of elections underlies the drawing.

The Institutions of Democracy are Corrupt

The cartoons of Molnar and Mitchell shown below (36 and 37) date from the same time, during a two-year period when an inquiry had found that Police Commissioner Allen had brought discredit on the Police Force, a Royal Commission was investigating corruption charges against Chief Stipendiary Magistrate Murray Farquhar, resulting in Premier Wran standing aside from office for nearly three months, Prisons Minister Rex Jackson was under investigation for corrupt exercise of his office, and politicians from both sides were accused of accepting money from the illegal gambling industry.

Even the sacred sporting institution of the NSW Rugby League was drawn into the same web. There certainly was a case to be made that politics in NSW was in the grip of organised corruption, and the strength of that case was soon to see the establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).



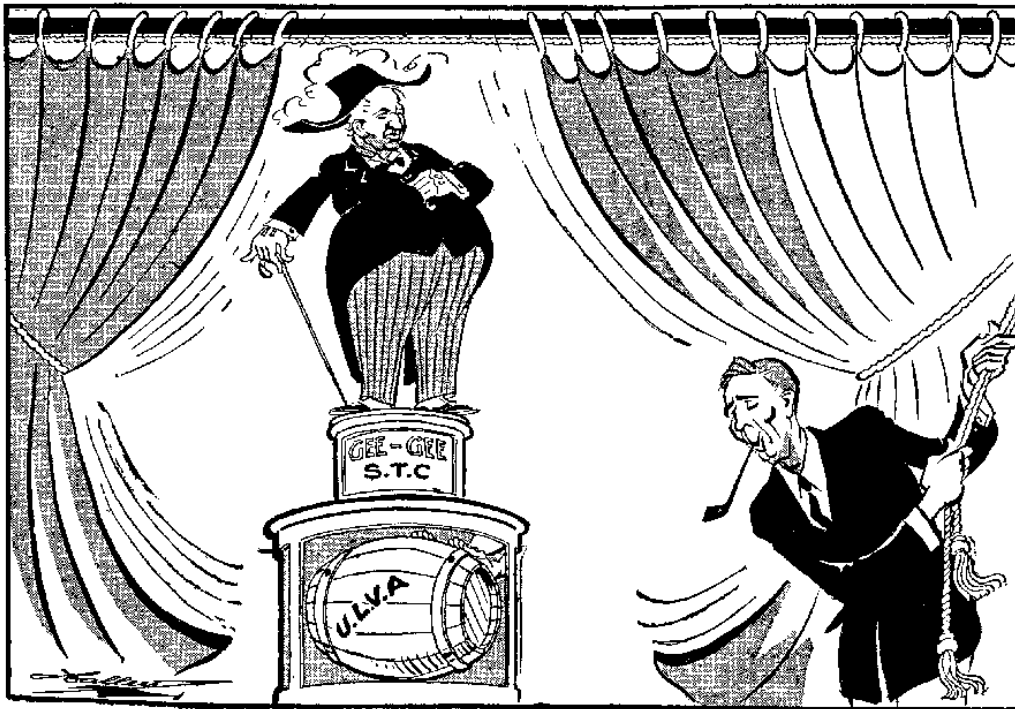
George Molnar, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 1984

It clearly is a central task of text or graphic journalists to highlight the issue of political corruption, and to lampoon corrupt individuals. Any human political institution will manifest some corruption. However, a reflection on the two cartoons shown here prompts the question whether Molnar and Mitchell were going beyond that legitimate brief for the sake of a quick laugh. There are numerous examples from other eras suggesting that these were not isolated examples. (See: 01, 03, 05, 08, 09, 10, 22, 35, 38, 41, 42, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50.) Exaggerating for the sake of impact, in simple terms they were taking the argument from the particular cases to the general. If the readers of the *Herald* or the *Australian* were to take the lesson of the drawings seriously, then there would be no hope for the institutions of a democratic society. Yet, even while trying to elicit a smile or a laugh, what cartoonist does not want to be taken seriously? The realistic situation was that the institutions of NSW politics were sheltering some corrupt individuals and practices, but not that they were inherently corrupt and incapable of reform.



Bill Mitchell, *Australian*, 2 March 1984

Some political institutions tend to be beyond criticism. That has been the case, for example, with the monarchy and its Australian Vice-Regal representatives for most of the last century. That convention has tended to break down in recent years with increasing attacks on minor members of the British royal family, but cartoon criticism of Governors or Governors-General is still rare. After the Whitlam sacking John Kerr had to suffer considerable public ridicule in the press, while the main example affecting NSW politics was the reaction of some sections of the press to the promotion of NSW Premier William McKell to the office of Governor-General during the time of the Chifley administration. For about six months the *Bulletin* and *Smith's Weekly* waged a fierce campaign in text and cartoons against both Chifley and McKell. The cartoon shown below (19) implies that McKell represented the interests of the liquor and turf racing interests. However, that was almost a unique case. The only other democratic institution that tends to have the same sacred cow protected status among working cartoonists has been their own mass media.



"'Tis a poor thing, but mine own."

Hallett, *Smith's Weekly*, 15 March 1947

Conclusions

Clearly it is impossible to generalise from cartoons in NSW, even over an extended period, to all cartoonists. Consequently, the discussion here is valuable more for raising questions than for providing answers. My own experience of following cartoon comment on politics in federal politics, other states, North America, and Europe suggests that similar patterns would be found elsewhere. One colleague proposed that Japan would not fit the same mould, presumably because of a different culture of respect for authority. Obviously, one of the questions to follow up would concern the relationship between the work of cartoonists and the accepted values of the local political culture. There clearly is scope for a great deal more work to be done on cartoons.

The central theme in this discussion is that the nature of the cartooning medium ensures that there is a lack of balance in the graphic comment on politics. Cartoons that praise politics, politicians, or the political institutions do not appear because they would not be humorous. Accepting that satire is of the essence of political cartooning, one question is whether there should be any limits at all on the kinds of images used. If it is unfair, and possibly actionable, for a journalist to imply that a politician is a liar or a crook, is it unfair for an artist to do the same? If not, why not?

The problem is that, if cartoons have any impact on public opinion, (and I am convinced that they do) then that impact is in the direction of increasing cynicism about politics, politicians and the political system. If it is true that people who enjoy cartoons are subjected to an extended, and partly subliminal, argument along the lines of the sub-headings in this paper — that there is no difference between politicians and parties, that all political promises are merely lies, that all politicians are venal and corrupt, that voters are stupid, that Parliament is a farce, elections a waste of time if not positively harmful, and that democracy is itself inherently corrupt — then one can only hope that the messages don't get through! Most other aspects of the mass media, even while manifesting partisan or systemic bias, are under pressure to provide balanced commentary. Where is the counterbalance to the negative influence discussed here?

Even if one concludes that there is a problem of a surfeit of negative images in political cartooning, it is not an automatic assumption that cartoonists ought to change their ways — or that cartoons in the nation's newspapers should be accompanied by a political "health warning"! One can accept the demands of the genre, yet look elsewhere for balancing comment. Perhaps there is an argument here for taking more seriously the teaching of citizenship responsibilities in schools or in other aspects of the mass media.

In the introduction to this discussion there was mention of the argument from Manning and Phiddian about the value of political satire in cartooning. I am sure that there is an important and positive contribution in satire. It is healthy in a democracy to make fun of people in power who take themselves too seriously or who try to cover over their inconsistencies with bluster or propaganda. The best political satire, whether acted out, written down, or drawn in cartoons, can cut to the core of political debate and highlight the real choices available in a working democracy. However, there probably also needs to be some consideration of the boundary lines between healthy satire and a rather more destructive cynicism. The sub-headings in this article suggest that there are some seriously negative messages involved. Manning and Phiddian suggest that recently there has not been enough satire; my question is whether, over an extended period, there has been a surfeit of cynicism. So, another task awaiting an author is to examine whether satire is a completely positive value in a democracy, or whether its contribution can change depending on the amount or the balance. Can there be too much or too unrelieved satire?

What about cynicism itself? It is possible to argue that a certain level of cynicism is healthy for the system. Australians have always had a reputation for their contempt of politicians, as Clive Bean has noted in the title of his article already cited. Yet this has not prevented our political system being remarkably stable and reasonably just (in any international comparison, at least) for a very long time.

At the same time, there is also an argument that a democratic system depends on a certain degree of popular trust in the political system. Australians have a reputation for relying upon the state to solve their most pressing problems without resorting to violence, hatred, or civil war. Is there an optimum level of cynicism, beyond which it is dangerous to indulge? In brief, is there a problem with our tradition of political cartooning?

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The main sources used in this discussion are the cartoons themselves, available for viewing at *The Drawing Board's* website: <http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/drawingboard/>. Each cartoon carries an acknowledgment of the artist and of the journal where it first appeared.