

A licence to mock: A response

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Haydon Manning and Robert Phiddian are quite correct in suggesting that my original article ‘sought to provoke debate on the role and value of cartooning in political debate’ in this country (2004, p. 25). That was my purpose, rather than to advance a strongly held thesis. I was concerned to ask a number of questions—real, not rhetorical ones—about a possible relationship between the images used by cartoonists and what I regard as a threateningly high level of political cynicism in contemporary Australia. I am open to being convinced that the answers I suggested are not sustainable. So I am delighted that they have responded with a considered piece of analysis. I liked the suggested taxonomy of cartoons—a useful task for the beginnings of analysis.

That said, I don’t think that Haydon and Robert have convinced me. Readers will have to make up their own minds. At a risk of over-simplifying, their argument depends on two assertions that should be capable of being tested empirically. The first is that contemporary Australians are not particularly cynical and that there is nothing to worry about. The second is that nobody takes any notice of cartoonists, and they have no impact on political thinking in society. I don’t believe either of those statements, and I suspect that, deep down, neither do Haydon and Robert. Let’s take them separately.

The question of the level of political cynicism or alienation in Australia is controverted. In a recent paper to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, Leigh Gollop compared the research of Murray Goot (who suggests that there is no problem) with that of Hugh Mackay (who claims there is) and comes down on the side of Mackay in arguing that ‘thought needs to be given to reforming our political institutions to counter a corrosive level of political alienation’ (2004, p. 2). Ultimately, however, I am prepared to listen to further argument on that matter. What concerns me more directly in this discussion is the bad image of politicians as liars, cheats, and scoundrels, whose reputation is below the level of used car salesmen, clergymen, and journalists. It was not always so. Rather than statistical or qualitative research, I am convinced by the overwhelming, if anecdotal, evidence that permeates the discussion in *The Prince’s New Clothes: Why Do Australians Dislike Their Politicians?*

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edited by David Burchell and Andrew Leigh (2002). Again, readers will decide where they stand. Perhaps they will respond?

As for the second assertion, I must admit that I was surprised that Haydon and Robert would argue that nobody takes any notice of cartoonists except to get a giggle. Why else would a political scientist and a researcher into political satire be interested in cartoonists? The example they use is interesting. It is certainly true that the great majority of cartoons published at the time of the Tampa and the 'children overboard' incidents were hostile to the Howard government's handling of the refugee problem. Like Haydon and Robert I don't have a problem with the savage bite of those cartoons. However, to argue that such unanimous cartoonist opinion did not affect a significant proportion of the electorate is not sustainable without much better evidence. With both major parties defending the Government, and with a majority of public opinion fixated on the perceived threat of wave after wave of refugee boats, how much worse might public opinion have been without the cartoonists? I don't know, and neither do they. As they point out early in the article, many cartoonists clearly think they are influential. And so do I.

Again, I am prepared to listen to further argument about how influential cartoonists are about individual issues that they highlight. My point is that, whatever their influence on defence, immigration, health, or economic policy, their impact on the image of politicians and the craft of politics is what concerns me. There are virtually no cartoons that are not negative. Cartoonists are not primarily responsible for the bad image of politicians. The adversarial nature of party, factional, and individual political competition is; and thus, ultimately, the politicians themselves are most to blame. Cartoonists come way down the list, after print, radio, and television journalists. However, there are strong countervailing forces working in the adversarial system, as on journalists. There are none on cartoonists. I would not support external constraints. I do encourage cartoonists to think about their craft and not to take a 'licence to mock' to be a licence to abuse.

Let me illustrate my concern by offering a different taxonomy of cartoons—those that satirise recognisable personalities and those that do not. Like Haydon and Robert, I have gained delight from some memorable cartoons taking the piss out of personalities like Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke, Keating, and Howard (to name just some prime ministers). The stunning series of cartoons by Pickering on Whitlam the rooster being dragged kicking and screaming from the roost for execution during 1975 still lives in my memory as capturing perfectly one aspect of political debate in that period. It did not have any impact on the popular image of Whitlam? C'mon! In my opinion Pickering was partisan, but not unfair, and that's OK. I do not want to discourage the ancient art of political caricature. I hope it will get even better. Still, I suspect that cartoonists who concentrate on personalities are in greater danger of abusing their craft than those who don't. A cartoon in the recent federal election

showing Latham asking the media to lay off his family, while he held up his son to the cameras, struck me as not only unfair to the man, but outrageously malicious.

On the other hand, I don't have any problem with the most caustic commentary of cartoonists who don't use recognisable personalities. I have no suggestions to offer artists like Leunig, Wilcox, Lindsay, or Petty, who prefer to satirise the issues and the system without recognisable faces. From the caricaturists, on the other hand, I await cartoons that commend the successes of politicians. Where are the cartoons supporting Howard's attempt to persuade Australians of the need for gun restraint after the Port Arthur massacre? Or giving attention to John Faulkner's relentless pursuit of dishonesty in Senate committees? Or offering a warm tribute to ex-Governor General Billy Dean? Or acknowledging Bob Brown's genuine and passionate concern for the environment? Or recognising the admirable presidency of the Republic Convention by Barry Jones and Ian Sinclair? The list is endless. Politicians are not saints, and some are scoundrels and hypocrites, but for a hundred and fifty years they have helped sustain one of the most democratic and well administered political systems in the world. I am happy giving cartoonists a licence to mock, but is it too much to ask that, just occasionally, credit be given where credit is due?

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