

In defence of the political cartoonists' licence to mock

Haydon Manning, Flinders University
Robert Phiddian, Flinders University

ABSTRACT

In a previous issue of *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, Michael Hogan discussed the role of political cartooning in Australia. Hogan argued that we ought to be concerned about how cartoons erode public confidence in politicians, parties, and democratic institutions. He sought to provoke debate on the role and value of cartooning in political debate in Australia, and we have taken up his invitation. We are more inclined than Hogan to support the licence of cartoonists to mock public figures and institutions freely. We base our view on: (1) an analysis of political cartooning as an established and understood element of free speech in Australia; (2) a provisional taxonomy of the types of political cartoon, judged by the effects they are liable to have on readers; and (3) some empirically based scepticism about the capacity of cartoons to directly influence public opinion. We conclude that cartoons make a valuable contribution to public debate that is distinct from journalism and written commentary, and that cartoonists should not be formally or informally encouraged to restrain their satirical instincts in the interests of balance or for fear of engendering public cynicism.

Haydon Manning <Haydon.Manning@flinders.edu.au> is a senior lecturer in the School of Political and International Studies at Flinders University, where he teaches and researches Australian electoral politics and environmental politics. Robert Phiddian <Robert.Phiddian@flinders.edu.au> is a senior lecturer in the Department of English at Flinders University, where he teaches and researches political satire. Both contribute an analysis of editorial cartoons to collections dealing with each federal election (edited by John Warhurst and Marian Simms). Robert is currently working on a biography of Bruce Petty; Haydon is working on sexism in political cartooning.

Our purpose in this paper is to define what constitutes ‘the political cartoon’, to discuss how cartoons function in political debate, and to address an argument advanced in this journal by Michael Hogan (2001): that Australian political cartoonists are culpable agents promoting public cynicism towards state institutions and political leaders. Unlike Hogan, we view the right of cartoonists to be freely provocative as a sign of health in a liberal democratic polity like Australia. While we don’t think that political cartoons operate the way Hogan claims, we welcome his foray into the field. He is quite right to assert that there has been little political analysis of cartoons in Australia. Indeed, although we do have some international (Anglo-American) scholarship to add to the mix, political cartoons are not a thoroughly researched field anywhere. We address Hogan’s arguments and offer some suggestions as to the public reach of editorial cartoons. But first it is necessary to establish what political cartoons are about as a genre.

The function of political cartoons: a provisional taxonomy

Cartoonists seek both to entertain readers and to lampoon vice and folly in political life. They hope to be influential, at least around the edges in political debate. Bill Leak of *The Australian*, for example, says, ‘I’m able to throw in little incendiary bombs, stir things up every now and then’ (personal communication 1 May 2004). Likewise, *The Age’s* Bruce Petty aims to provoke people ‘into thinking again about an issue’ by ‘using a metaphor, we can say things a journalist can’t say’ (cited in Miller 2002). In practice, cartoonists do enjoy a special privilege in modern democracies: they are allowed to be extravagantly critical of people and institutions in public life. They are modern-day court jesters, ‘set apart by their licence to mock the king’ (Seymour-Ure 1997, p. 2). A cartoonist’s caricature may well ‘skewer a politician as effectively as the written or spoken word’, so their work commands ‘a wary kind of respect’ (Seymour-Ure 2003, p. 230). Cartoonists may be comically entertaining, or society’s sages on a major public issue or on the actions of a leader, or both at the same time. Importantly, they are assured a daily audience numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and while some ‘readers’ enjoy only a moment’s amusement, others roar with laughter. A few may even shrink, anguished by the cartoon’s moral tale. Whatever other social benefits the genre offers, political cartoonists maintain that their purpose is to censure the actions of the powerful via the force of ridicule. Cartoonists claim, in other words, to be satirists, and consequently to have the right to the satirist’s arsenal of ridicule, parody, metaphor, and archetype, as outlined by scholars such as Gombrich (1978), Press (1981), and Seymour-Ure (2003).

Cartoonists exploit their licence in several ways, and we can place their intent (and, less assuredly, their impact on readers) on a spectrum that ranges from comic commentary to revolutionary satire. As we are about to address Hogan’s argument that cartoons sponsor a dangerous cynicism in the public mind about public figures and institutions, some clear thinking about the purpose and effects of cartooning is

necessary. Such thinking will remain in the realms of speculation until someone is courageous (or foolish) enough to embark on extensive quantitative research on the effects of cartooning. However, on the basis of literary research into the nature and effects of satire (Griffin 1994; Paulson 1967) and some international analysis of political cartoons, we can attempt a provisional taxonomy of the effects of cartoons. We assume that, for political analysis, the responses of readers to cartoons are the relevant object of study. It is useful to assess cartoonists' stated or implicit intentions for their work, but only as a means of establishing how the cartoons might work with their audience. Another necessary caveat in ascribing effects to cartoons is that we cannot assume a monoglot audience for a cartoon (or any satirical communication), so we need to be able to trace effects to definable subsets of the readership of papers, and not ascribe them to that mythic beast, 'the general public'.

So, given that we focus on the political function of cartoons rather than their metaphoric or artistic content, the scholar who has written most extensively on this topic, is the American, Charles Press (1981). His book is of its time and place—in particular, Press seems particularly shocked by the collapse of the Kennedy era's liberal-progressive consensus into the shriller and more dislocating debates of the later 1960s and 1970s (see also Minix 2004)—but it does provide a starting point and many useful illustrations, principally from cartooning in the United States. Press sorts cartoons into three essential categories: (1) descriptive, (2) laughing satirical, and (3) destructive satirical. We will outline what these categories might mean for analysing Australian cartooning, and add a needed extra type: (4) cartoons that exhibit savage indignation.

1. *The descriptive cartoon*

'The descriptive cartoon appears to be almost neutral in that the cartoonist is saying little more than "this is the way it is"' (Press 1981, p. 75). Such cartoons lack a clear political opinion and are not really satirical at all. They may make us laugh, but we are responding to humour rather than satire. They 'convey a suggestion of fatalism, especially when [they dwell] on those tragic flaws which are built into all individuals or nations, which must be accepted as the mysterious givens of life' (Press 1981, p. 75). Consequently, they are 'especially suited to the expression of status quo viewpoints' (Press 1981, p. 75). Because they provide comic commentary on the affairs of the day, their main purpose is to amuse readers and their chief political side-effect is to naturalise the political process for the audience.

To draw an election as a horse race or a National Party politician as a hayseed may lighten the mood of readers as they leaf through the paper, but it has no serious designs on their opinions. Some cartoonists do little else but this sort of humorous comic commentary on the events of the day—Jeff Hook in the *Melbourne Sun* and *Herald-Sun* was for many years a distinguished practitioner of the art of the descriptive cartoon. All cartoonists do it some of the time, when they lack strong

convictions about the subject they are working on. On 11 November 1975, the Australian Government, led by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, was dismissed from office by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, forcing a national election. Such unprecedented action, although legal under Australia's constitution, produced the most politically charged day in Australian political and constitutional history. Yet as Figure 1 shows, cartoonist Hook remained scrupulously balanced in his political humour.

That Hook's cartoon hit the streets only hours before Kerr acted (note the little crown still on Whitlam's head) is a testament to Hook's equanimity and identification with the little bloke in the ballot box. Though some deprecate this sort of stuff as mere 'gags', we have nothing against 'cartoons whose primary purpose seems to be only a light moment of entertainment' (Press 1981, p. 75). There is just little point in writing about them at any length. All commentators on descriptive cartoons, or comic commentary, as we have called it (Manning & Phiddian 2000), can do is explain the jokes, which is an activity of dubious usefulness and little political urgency.

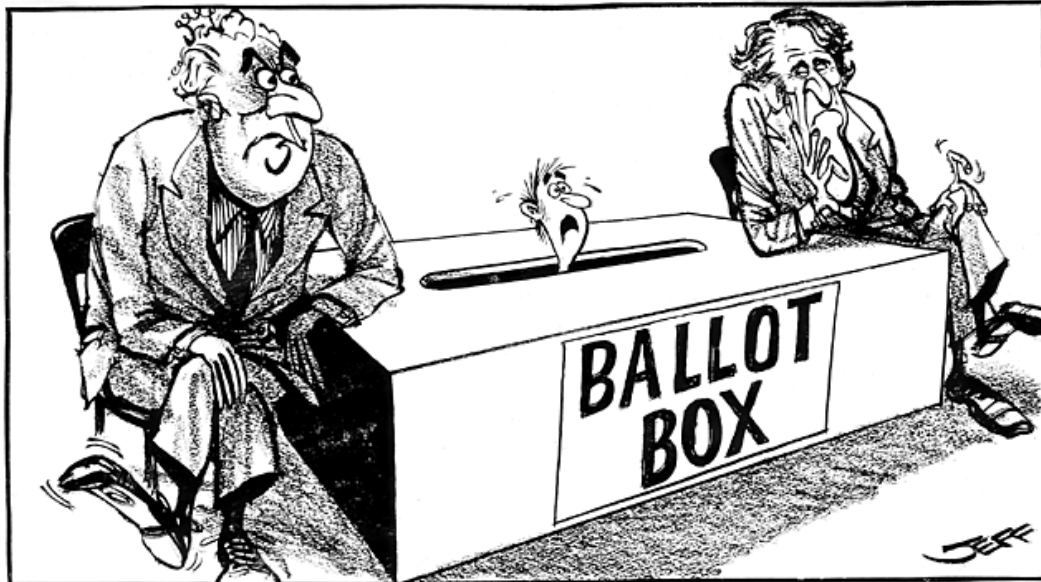
2. *The laughing satirical cartoon*

Press argues that 'Most political cartoons in democracies are of the laughing-satire type. They accept the legitimacy of those they criticise' (1981, p. 75). Many cartoonists draw their way into the debates of the day, calling knaves and fools to account so that society might work better. Pryor in the *Canberra Times*, Knight in the *Herald-Sun*, or Nicholson in *The Australian* do a lot of this sort of thing, acting as a loyal opposition to the idiocies and corruptions of the day. Disconcertingly, politicians are often rather proud of appearing in such satirical drawings, and many cover their walls with cartoonists' originals or copies. This is not entirely a category error on politicians' parts, because laughing satirical cartoons do take them and the business they are in seriously. As Press suggests:

The cartoons are aimed at reform of administration rather than destruction of the system. They are the corrective in keeping politicians honest without chastising them severely. A kind of chaffing tone, with some bite suggests a message "You have these faults and we wish you would reform, but whether you do or not, we will still support and perhaps even like you" (1981, p. 75).

'Perhaps even like you' is overdoing it for Australian cartooning, where the larrikin tradition of corrosive criticism ('sledging', as it is known in sport) tends to reign. In Australia, laughing satirical cartooning criticises individual politicians and their projects in the interests of maintaining what the cartoonists see as the nation's continuing moral and institutional health. Consequently, laughing satirical cartooning has become an integral part of political debate in many stable liberal democracies.

Figure 1. Jeff Hook, *Herald-Sun*, 11 November 1975



MAN I MAKE A SUGGESTION?!

Figure 2. Peter Nicholson, *The Australian*, 9 March 1996



The sizable minority of the population who are engaged or interested in politics—from the prime minister or president down to those of us who read the op-ed pages of newspapers—look to laughing satirical cartoons as a sort of reality check. Presenting more than mere description is Nicholson’s clever depiction of newly elected Prime Minister John Howard busily at work while the grander political artist, the defeated Paul Keating, departs the stage, head bowed (see Figure 2). In our democracies, such cartoons are one of the checks and balances in the system that seek to make it difficult for people to get away with abuses of common standards or morality, probity, and wisdom. It would be easy to exaggerate the efficacy of such criticism, but on a good day, as Press argues, ‘[t]he trick that the best cartoonists manage is to keep the laughter up so high that they can slice unusually deep’ (Press 1981, p. 76).

3. *The destructive satirical cartoon*

Destructive satirical cartooning does not accept the legitimacy of the system and is, according to Press, consciously revolutionary. This kind of extreme cartooning seldom appears in mass distribution daily newspapers. It tends to be confined to journals of extremist groups, though there have been times (Press cites Gilray in Regency England and Gross in Weimar Germany) when this sort of satire becomes widespread. Figure 3 shows an image Press describes in the following way:

[T]he drawing is meant to be cruel and to hurt, but in that the message says unmistakably, “These creatures that I criticise are not human; they should not be allowed to exist.” When one begins to draw one’s opponents as apes or as capitalists with dollar signs or radicals with wild looks and bombs, one starts in the direction of this kind of satire, but it can still be all in good fun, somewhat like the way the fiendish villain is depicted in a melodrama. The real stab comes when the artist truly means that there is little or no hope for redemption for the society or for the immediate political targets, and the hate shines through, uncontrolled and slightly insane (1981, p. 76–77).

Destructive satirical cartooning comes out of revolutionary fervour or social despair, and it is rare in Australian mainstream media. In national or metropolitan newspapers, it is so rare that we feel confident in asserting that such cartooning has a negligible influence on public opinion. Even if it is widespread in specialised journals (which we doubt but cannot demonstrate without a lot of research), the fact that such journals tend overwhelmingly to circulate among the already converted suggests that such cartoons seldom change minds, though they may strengthen revolutionary cadres in their convictions. Very little political influence can lie at this end of the cartooning spectrum—not for lack of will on the part of the cartoonists, but for lack of an impressionable audience.

Figure 3. *Workers' Weekly*, 20 May 1931

The Boss's Box of Tricks

4. *Cartoons displaying savage indignation*

It may seem superfluous to write so extensively on so ineffective a phenomenon as the destructively satirical cartoon, but it is necessary to map that end of Press's spectrum so that we can add the element his analysis seems to lack. This is the savagely indignant cartooning that, in the Australian tradition at least, is often the most memorable and influential. We suspect that Press was shocked into a Manichean distinction between laughing and destructive satire by his experience of the Vietnam and Watergate years. He began his career as a political scientist in the 1950s, and his book on cartooning was published in 1981, so he may have felt that the confident progressive liberalism that marked the early decades of his political maturity was imperilled by radicals on either side. We indulge in this amateur psychologising only because we seek some explanation for the obvious gap in Press's taxonomy between critique that is fundamentally loyal to the system and cartooning that seeks to overturn the present order. Press does his best to extend laughing satire to the border with destructive satire, but the result is that his laughing satire becomes a clumsily broad category that plays down real differences. It seems to us that a cartoonist can express quite deep reservations about the established patterns of distribution of power and resources without hating the system and its minions or

seeking their wholesale destruction. A phrase that covers serious satirical critique that seeks revision of the ways of the world without necessarily demanding revolution was coined by Jonathan Swift in his epitaph: *saeva indignatio*, or savage indignation.¹

For savagely indignant cartooning, the legitimacy of the system and those who hold office in it is not the urgent issue. Rather, the urgent issues are such things as lies over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, or politically correct suppression of information about sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities. These cartoons have a greater sense of urgency than can really be covered by Press's category of laughing satire (though he does try to stretch the category to fit). But they do not propose a systematic solution to society's ills. Leunig's horror at an approaching war when political leaders have conjured only unconvincing justifications is simply, though shockingly apparent, in his reminder of innocence facing butchery and never knowing why (Figure 4). Such cartoons aim to say something like, 'Whether or not most things are OK in this country of ours, this act/inaction is rotten. Any citizen of good faith needs to concentrate on fixing this blight.' The wilder cartoonists in the broadsheets—Leak, Leunig and Petty, for example—often achieve this sort of thing.

Done too persistently or predictably, savage indignation can descend into alarmist preachiness. Done well, though, it can provoke serious thought about the distribution of power, wealth and justice.

So, to summarise, we argue that political cartoons exist on a spectrum ranging across four distinct zones: descriptive comic commentary, laughing satire, savage indignation and destructive satire. However, there are two reasons why it is impossible to be too dogmatic about how individual cartoons fit into particular categories. The first is that in all interpretive taxonomies, the borders between categories on a spectrum are necessarily fuzzy. The second is a more important point that leads us into our next section: competent readers will, for various reasons, not all have the same reaction to a particular cartoon, and may plausibly place it in different categories. If we are interested in the political effects of cartoons, we need to study not just what cartoonists think they are doing, but also how members of the voting public understand what they are doing.

¹ The full epitaph reads:

Hic depositum est corpus / JONATHAN SWIFT S.T.D. / Huyus Ecclesiae Cathedralis

Decani / Ubi saeva indignation / Ulterius / Cor lacerare nequit. / Abi Viator / Et imitare, si poteris. / Strenuum pro virili / Libertatis Vindicatorem. / Obiit 19 Die Mensis Octobris / A.D. 1745 Anno Ætatis 78

W.B. Yeats' translation [which softens Swift's Latin considerably]:

Swift has sailed into his rest. / Savage indignation there / cannot lacerate his breast. / Imitate him if you can, / world-besotted traveller. / He served human liberty. (Jonathan Swift n.d.)

Figure 4. Michael Leunig, *The Age*, 21 February 2003



Hogan's argument and cartoonists' responsibility

In an earlier volume of *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, Hogan takes us into the territory of the effects of cartoons, and for this he is to be congratulated. However, we disagree with his choice of cynicism as a governing concept. Hogan argues that reflection on political cartooning in Australia is a 'fairly untested area in the study of politics' and that his study of some 500 political cartoons is 'intentionally tentative, posing ... questions rather than asserting conclusions' (2001, p. 27). He invites us to question the purpose of political cartoons by drawing an analogy between cartooning and political journalism:

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—[should] cartoonists ... be able to lampoon mercilessly, while journalists ... beware—or is the cartoonist simply a journalist who uses visual humour? (2001, p. 31).

It is a good string of questions, and well worth attending to as a reality check on the wilder claims of cartoonists and other satirists—that they are the only truth tellers in an insane and corrupt world. However, we disagree with the direction of these quasi-rhetorical questions. Cartoonists are not journalists, and they should be accorded extra licence to be extravagant and even unfair in their criticisms of public life. As satirists, they make a different implicit claim for the truth value of their work from the claim that underlies journalism. Cartoonists are not an information source; they are part of public debate, ostentatiously engaged in comment rather than reporting, and in our view, readers know this and take it into account.

Later Hogan broaches the topic of the limits of satire:

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 crook, is it unfair [for cartoonists] to do the same? If not, why not? (2001, p. 47)

In general, Hogan believes that the degree of negative criticism accorded politicians in the mass media is a problem, and suggests that cartoonists merely reinforce this negativity (pp. 29–30). Like the journalists and commentators, cartoonists lack balance in their depiction of current events, he says, and while he stresses the tentative nature of his conclusions, Hogan leaves the reader with little doubt that he thinks cartoonists should limit their bias. Describing the present as a time when political cartoons are ‘not so ideologically benign’ (p. 33), he warns that:

Cartoons are usually meant to be funny, even 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 (2001, p. 34).

To this we counter that ‘negativity’ is the normal fare of satire and cartooning, and that any competent reader takes this into account when reading in these genres. Not only does Hogan’s analogy between cartoons and journalism fail to hold, but the fact that cartoons appear beside journalism that purports to give balanced reportage reminds readers that cartoons are a different, wilder, and more opinionated sort of communication. Arguing for internal balance in cartoons misconceives the cartoonist’s role. Cartoonists do not exist in a vacuum; they exist in our world, a world full of political spin and rhetoric orchestrated by leaders and their burgeoning staff of research and media advisers. We don’t expect to receive a balanced description of reality from a leader’s doorstep interview, press release or policy speech. Cartoonists are one group that seeks to counter the spin of stage-managed public debate.

Noting that Australian party politics is by nature adversarial, and that 'criticism is at the heart of the system', Hogan worries that public cynicism is increasing to a disturbing level (2001, p. 28). He is not alone in asserting that this is an increasing problem (see Burchell & Leigh 2002), but measuring 'cynicism' is fraught with difficulty. Unlike alienation (a concept he rejects, but which is amenable to some degree of empirical demonstration), cynicism is an ambiguous concept. One observer's caustic cynicism is another's healthy scepticism; any distinction between the two is, at root, a value judgment. Moreover, it is a value judgment that depends on the reader's ideological position. The cartoons on asylum seekers in the 2001 election that we discuss in the next section illustrate this point well. Supporters of the Howard Government would, presumably, be inclined to see these cartoons as cynical misrepresentations of the motives of the politicians involved; we are inclined to see them as salutary scepticism. The point is not that we are right and Howard Government supporters wrong in this judgment; we believe that, but can only assert it. What matters is that the scepticism these cartoons express is available in the mass media—members of the public can then make up their own minds. Cartoonists should not be exhorted to exercise their internal censors more strongly before they start drawing; in the interests of a healthy democratic debate, they should publish and (if necessary) be damned. Their licence is only worth having if they push it.

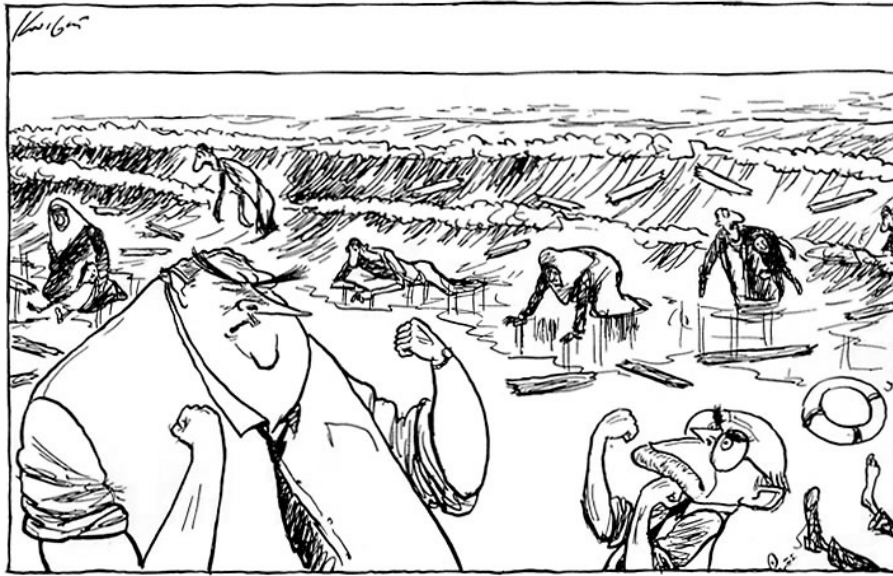
This is a value judgment that contrasts with Hogan's. But we think cynicism is a risk worth taking for cartoonists if the alternative is a too-compliant media. It is also possible that current jeremiads on the increasing cynicism of the public are exaggerated. We point here to Goot's (2002) insightful empirical work, in which he challenges claims that cynicism and distrust of politics and parties is greater than in the past. Goot argues that for the most part, Australians care who wins elections, are interested in election campaigns, and maintain respect for political institutions. Our chief disagreement with Hogan concerns reader response: in our view, the average Australian voter is not so easily shaped by the media as his 'infection' model of reader response seems to assume. After all, if voters are so impressionable, the fact that several of Hogan's examples of cynical cartoons are decades old suggests that all voters should have become inoperably cynical some time ago. As our study of cartooning during the 2001 election campaign suggests, however, people are not easily separated from their pre-existing convictions about the peril posed by boat people, despite a most concerted campaign by cartoonists (Manning & Phiddian 2002).

Moralists or cynics? The cartoonists and the boat people in 2001

Often newspaper cartoons do little more than plug a hole on the page that has to be filled every day, and most of their work can be described as comic commentary on current events. However, cartoons also have a licence to draw readers emotionally and intelligently into significant and disturbing matters of public importance, as happened during the 2001 federal election campaign. Moreover, even cartoons that are ostensibly not serious can occasionally slip under the defences that we all

maintain to protect ourselves from the world of tragedy that is always out there, waiting for our attention. Mark Knight's and Peter Nicholson's cartoons provide a dark view of our political leaders in election mode at the time of the SIEV X's sinking (see Figures 5 and 6). These cartoons depict events on 24 and 25 October 2001, when 350 refugees on route to Australia drowned off our northwest coast. Extensively covered by the media, the deaths brought home the perils faced by asylum seekers. Across the editorial pages cartoonists unanimously railed against both Prime Minister Howard and the opposition leader, Kim Beazley, for the way they appeared to exploit public fear over border protection for electoral gain (see Manning & Phiddian 2001 for detail). Both cartoons shown here sum up the moral bankruptcy of our leaders on this issue: they ignore human tragedy except to the extent that it can be used to electoral advantage (see Figures 5 & 6). The cartoons may well be cynical, but they have a point, and they confront readers with it in a way that is hard to avoid. Whether or not this is fair comment, it deserves to be heard.

Figure 5. Mark Knight, *Sun Herald*, 24 October 2001



Finally, Spooner's cartoon (Figure 7) is an example of satire where laughter is not the point. Like Nicholson's and Knight's, this cartoon hardly fits the category of destructive satire; rather, savage indignation seems a more appropriate description. Spooner's depiction of Prime Minister Howard flinging compassion and dignity out of the boat (the ship of state?) while opposition leader Beazley merely wrings his hands is not anger directed at the system of government. It is anger for a system of morality that is being debased in the interests of political expedience. Yet the cartoonists' disgust with the major parties' failure to demonstrate compassion for the boat people apparently put them very much out of step with public opinion.

Figure 6. Peter Nicholson, *The Australian*, 24 October 2001



Figure 7. John Spooner, *The Age*, 12 October 2001



The effect of cartoons in a plural media

Readers recognise cartoons as part of newspapers that give a range of views, and are highly unlikely to mistake them for distillations of a unified editorial message. It is a testament to pluralism in our political and media culture that cartoonists so often lampoon national leaders in stark contradiction to editorial opinion. For example, Peter Nicholson's pocket cartoons often appear adjacent to banner headlines and stories on *The Australian's* front page that they conflict with—as was evident in the lead-up to the war in Iraq in early 2003. Cartoons appear to have little impact on editorial positioning, and they are unlikely to be enough to separate many readers of the paper from their convictions. Some evidence can be led to support this hunch, but it is far from conclusive.

In the absence of surveys asking people whether they read the editorial cartoon, and whether they feel it influences their views of the news of the day, we are left with more circuitous means of making an approximate assessment. Table 1 presents responses in successive *Australian Election Studies* to the question, 'How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in the newspapers?'. Over the period 1987 to 2001, when reasonably consistent questions were asked on this matter, around 50 to 60 per cent responded that they used newspapers 'some' or a 'good deal'.

What does this say about the influence of editorial cartoons? It is fair to conclude that among the 20 per cent or so who say they read newspapers a 'good deal', many would digest the editorial cartoon. A reasonable test of the cartoonists' possible influence would be to cross-tabulate responses to the 2001 *Australian Election Study* question 'Followed election news in the newspapers' with views on the statement, 'All boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back' (Table 2). By doing this we can look at how respondents who use newspapers a 'good deal' responded; they might, after all, be the 20 per cent of the population in favour of accepting asylum seekers and thus in thrall to the influence of cartoonists. If the cartoonists are influential, it would follow that their hostility towards the government's and the opposition's position on border protection should produce a higher percentage of keen newspaper readers opposed to turning the boats back than of respondents who do not depend so greatly upon newspaper coverage of the election campaign. A little over half of those who use newspapers a 'good deal' during the campaign 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with turning the boats back; three-quarters of the people who never follow the campaign through newspapers wanted the boats turned back.

Table 1. Followed election news in newspapers

1987/1990*	1987	1990	1996	2001	1996/2001
	%	%	%	%	
<i>Often</i>	33	27	18	16	<i>Good deal</i>
<i>Sometimes</i>	32	32	40	37	<i>Some</i>
<i>Rarely</i>	19	23	29	31	<i>Not much</i>
<i>Not at all</i>	16	17	12	16	<i>None</i>

* The response categories changed between the surveys of 1990 and 1996

Source: *Australian Election Studies* (1987, 1990, 1996 and 2001)

Table 2. Respondents' level of newspaper readership and views on turning asylum seekers back

		<i>Followed election in newspapers</i>			
		A good deal	Some	Not much	None
		%	%	%	%
<i>Asylum seekers turned back?</i>	Strongly agree	30	34	38	49
	Agree	23	25	27	25
	Neither agree nor disagree	13	19	19	19
	Disagree	18	14	10	5
	Strongly disagree	16	8	6	2
n		311	731	610	305

Source: *Australian Election Study, 2001*²

On the surface it appears that high levels of newspaper readership and opposition to turning boats back show some correlation, but can we conclude that the cartoonists contribute to this? Or are the kind of people who read newspapers more likely to be the kind of people who feel sympathy for asylum seekers? And given that a majority in *all* groups, including those who followed the election 'a good deal' in newspapers, positively agreed with the policy of turning asylum seekers back, these figures cannot support the conclusion that cartoonists have a strong influence on public opinion.

² Questions:

A.2. 'How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in the —a good deal, some, not much or none at all?'; and

E.4. ASYLUM 'All boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back.'

Conclusion

If cartoons do not form their readers' opinions, what do they do? Many conflicting claims are available here, and we cannot confidently assert a single answer because the skill and purposes both of readers and cartoonists vary so much. Fisher suggests that the most effective cartoons tend 'not to confront and to challenge but to reinforce and build on a priori beliefs, values and prejudices' (cited in Minix 2004, p. 78). Not surprisingly, working cartoonists are inclined to make stronger claims for their art. But the inevitable partiality that comes with making a living from a practice should not mean that we discount cartoonists' expressed aim of provoking 'people into thinking again about an issue' (Petty, noted above). Leunig expands the possible effects of cartoons from thinking into the realm of feeling, pointing to a sort of comic catharsis that is an occasional result of a good cartoon:

The Cartoonist is working in a more primitive, in a sense infantile way and so gets in under the intellect. It's raw, rough, vaudevillian, naughty. It's not scholarly, it's a bit improper. People drop their defences more when faced with a drawing. It gets in under their guard (*Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend*, 13 July 2002).

We are moving inevitably into a realm of potential effects that will vary case by case. What seems clear is that the instrumental claim, that cartoons give people their opinions on matters of public importance, is not supported by available evidence. Rather, it is more likely that cartoons are political commentary that confirms citizens' pre-existing views. Sometimes they can, however, do more than that, and that surplus can be politically valuable. As Cathy Wilcox of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* describes it, her purpose is 'looking under and behind the surface of events, reading between the lines, unravelling the spin doctors' spinning' (*Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend*, 13 July 2002). To succeed in this often enough is a smaller and more reasonable mission than the charismatic satirist's desire to transform the polity and the world. That is the satirical cartoon's chief virtue: it returns the final responsibility for discernment to the place it belongs in a democracy—with the reading public.

As readers and citizens, it is our responsibility to judge whether particular cartoons express healthy scepticism or lapse into cheap cynicism. To this extent we agree with Hogan that 'cartoons are important in helping to inform the electorate' (2001, p. 29). But we think he exaggerates cartoons' power to change minds or 'infect' readers with cynicism; thus we also believe that the solution he prescribes (more self-censorship) is unnecessary.

Many of the cartoons Hogan considers were published in the pre-television era, and it seems likely that cartoons were read more widely then than they are today. Yet Hogan argues that cartoons are contributing to an acute state of cynicism in the voting public today. The problem for Hogan's thesis is that Australian traditions of

representative democracy developed and thrived in the pre-television age, when cartoons were probably at their most influential. At the risk of sounding glib or parochial, Hogan's sample of cartoons focuses on the bear-pit of New South Wales politics—we suspect that even the most cheerful observer might be pushed to cynicism and to having little esteem for persons and institutions.

In our view, cartoonists pose no significant threat to public confidence in the institutions of liberal democracy. Our research indicates that cartoons may contribute to public opinion among those who read the editorial pages, but they are not a large direct influence. Cartoons mainly reinforce views held strongly rather than sway opinion immediately; they may also influence the climate of opinion among newspaper readers over time. Their constant effect is to maintain public scepticism about the motivations and spin of politicians, and while Hogan clearly believes that this effect too often slips over into the sponsorship of cynicism, we think this more of a benefit than a risk. The contention that political cartoonists should be more balanced and temperate in their work both exaggerates their influence and misconstrues the purpose of their art. If the logic of this argument means bringing cartoonists more clearly within the ambit of defamation law, we strongly oppose it. This attitude underestimates the capacity of citizens to recognise satire as the hyperbolic form of political commentary that it is. Very little would be gained and a significant element of the free press would be lost if we sought to put conditions on cartoonists' licence to mock.

REFERENCES

Australian Election Studies:

- McAllister, I. & Mughan, A. 1987, Australian Election Survey, 1987 [computer file], Canberra, Social Science Data Archives, The Australian National University, SSSA No. 445.
- McAllister, I., Jones R. & Gow, D. 1990, Australian Election Study, 1990 [computer file], Canberra, Social Science Data Archives, The Australian National University, SSSA No. 570.
- Jones, R., McAllister I. & Gow, D. 1996, Australian Election Study, 1996 [computer file], Canberra, Social Science Data Archives, The Australian National University, SSSA No. 943.
- Bean, C., Gow, D. & McAllister, I. 2002, Australian Election Study, 2001 [computer file], Canberra, Social Science Data Archives, The Australian National University, 2002.
- Burchell, D & Leigh, A. (eds) 2002, 'Introduction', *The Prince's New Clothes: Why Do Australians Dislike Their Politicians?*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Gombrich, E. H. 1978, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, Phaidon Press, Oxford.
- Goot, M. 2002, 'Distrustful, disenchanted and disengaged? Public opinion on politics, politicians and the parties, an historical perspective', in *The Prince's New Clothes*, eds D. Burchell & A. Leigh, UNSW Press, Sydney, pp. 9–46.
- Griffin, D. 1994, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington.

- Hogan, M. 2001, 'Cartoonists and political cynicism', *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 27–50 [Online], Available: <http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/drawingboard/journal/0107/hogan.html> [2004, Nov 25].
- Manning, H. & Phiddian, R. 2000, 'Where are the clowns? Political satire in the 1998 federal election campaign', in *Howard's Agenda, The 1998 Federal Election*, eds M. Simms & J. Warhurst, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.
- Manning, H. & Phiddian, R. 2002, 'Two men and some boats—the cartoonists and the 2001 election', in *2001 The Centenary Election*, J. Warhurst & M. Simms, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.
- Miller, P. 2002, 'Laughing with knives', *Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend*, 13 July.
- Minix, D. 2004, 'Political cartoons, a research note', *Southwestern Journal of International Studies*, March.
- Paulson, R. 1967, *The Fictions of Satire*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Press, C. 1981, *The Political Cartoon*, Fairleigh Dickinson, Rutherford.
- Seymour-Ure, C. 1997, 'Drawn and quartered: how wide a world for the political cartoon?', *The Hocken Lecture 1996*, The Hocken Library & the New Zealand Cartoon Archive Trust, The Printing Department, University of Otago, Dunedin, pp. 1–43.
- Seymour-Ure, C. 2003, *Prime Ministers and the Media, Issues of Power and Control*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Spooner, J. 1999, *A Spooner in the Works*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.
- WordIQ.com n.d. Jonathan Swift [Online], Available: http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Jonathan_Swift [2004, Aug 9].