

## How political, satirical cartoons illustrated Australia's *WorkChoices* debate

Keith Townsend, Griffith University  
Paula McDonald, Queensland University of Technology  
Lin Esders, Queensland University of Technology

### ABSTRACT

Political cartoons are a ubiquitous form of satire which assists the public to interpret political life. This study examined the tone and content of 107 political, satirical cartoon images published in mainstream Australian newspapers in 2005 and 2006. The cartoons illustrated the sweeping reforms of the industrial relations system at a turbulent time in Australia's political history. We investigate two dimensions of a sample of widely published cartoons—tone and content—using an established typology. We find that the images were conveyed in a moderate tone in that they were more about poking fun at and questioning authority and power, rather than simply describing the issues on one hand, or demonstrating any revolutionary fervour on the other. The cartoons' content represented many of the concerns and issues being voiced by employer groups, government, opposition, unions and the media at the time. The images were an important part of the wider political discourse and potentially a mechanism through which industrial relations was placed squarely in the minds of working Australians.

*Dr Keith Townsend <[k.townsend@griffith.edu.au](mailto:k.townsend@griffith.edu.au)> works in the Centre for Work, Employment and Wellbeing, and Department of Employment Relations at Griffith Business School, Griffith University. His research interests include employee misbehaviour and resistance, work-life balance and working time, and popular culture. Dr Paula McDonald <[p.mcdonald@qut.edu.au](mailto:p.mcdonald@qut.edu.au)> is a senior lecturer in the School of Management at Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests include gender and work, youth employment, work-life balance, and work and popular culture. She works closely with several community organisations and public sector departments in Queensland on projects related to the quality of employment. Lin Esders is a currently completing her Masters Degree in Research in the School of Management at Queensland University of Technology. Lin has been employed as a school teacher and within the Queensland Teachers Union and has a keen research interest in the field of teacher workloads.*

## INTRODUCTION

Political satire can take many forms and has traditionally played an important role in society. One form of political satire in popular culture, the political cartoon, has informed the public by illuminating complex political issues that affect peoples' lives (Press 1981; Manning & Phiddian 2004). They achieve this mainly via cynicism towards those in government and others with power, such as the political opposition, employers and trade unions. Recent social and cultural shifts, however, have changed the role of political cartoons in shaping the way people make sense of their world. Declining newspaper readership, 24-hour streaming of news via the Internet, and the corporatisation of media are some of the factors which have been argued to diminish the accessibility of confrontational, controversial cartoons (Fiore 2004; Oliphant 2004). Yet political cartoons still reach a large number of citizens, provide a condensed contribution to public debates and have the potential to encapsulate moments in history (Benson 2005).

The introduction of new industrial relations laws in Australia in 2006 provides an opportunity to explore the nature of political cartoons during a time of substantial political and social reform. We use descriptive analysis to explore a sample of political satirical cartoons published during a critical phase of the *WorkChoices* debate, addressing the content of the cartoons as well as the 'tone' of the images, using a framework devised by Manning and Phiddian (2004). The study provides insight about how contemporary satirical cartoons depict a contentious political debate and allows for reflection on how cartoons might inform their readers about broader notions of work and its relationship with power structures in such an environment.

### The role of political cartoons

Satire has been defined as 'an idiom of criticism, correction and reform, most readily identifiable by its use of humour' (Condren 2002, p. 80). Conventional satirical theory asserts that the business of the satirist is to clearly demarcate vice from virtue (Griffin 1994, p. 36), to be a 'moral mirror' (Koelble & Robins 2007, p. 318), or to 'see the world as a battlefield between a definite, clearly understood good, which he represents, and an equally clear-cut evil' (Kernan, 1959, pp. 21–22). Similarly, the conventional view of satire holds that the 'enemy' or the target of the satire is isolated because satirical representations illustrate and reinforce values such as honesty, integrity, and humility (Condren 2002). Condren (1997) and Griffin (1994) both recognise that 'moral virtues' are socially constructed and reinforced through satire presented in mainstream media. An example is the highly personal satires of the Australian politician Pauline Hanson in 1998–99, that were generated by and for educated urban elites, reaffirming their values and bonding them in a sense of social and intellectual superiority (Condren 2002).

However, not all agree that clear moral standards are at the centre of satire. Griffen (1994) asserts, for example, that satire may also provoke, challenge and unsettle convictions and occasionally shatter illusions, by asking questions and raising doubts, without providing answers. Simple and straightforward political cartoons have been compared to ‘switchblades’, in that they cut deep and leave an impression (Conners 2005, p. 479). In this way Griffen (1994) argues, satire can have important political consequences.

The role of political, satirical cartoons more specifically has traditionally been to contribute to constructive debate about the political issues that affect the general public. The political cartoon differs from a news article in that it can condense the meaning of events, personas and actions into tableaux that encourage people to think (Edwards & Ware 2005). The motivation and essence behind the cartoonist’s desire to be involved in the medium is not an ambiguous one—it is to ‘throw incendiary bombs’ (Leak, in Manning & Phiddian 2004, p. 26), inform, laugh at, and be indignant about the wrongs of our society. Indeed, the right of a cartoonist to provide provocative messages is argued to be a sign of a healthy liberal democratic society (Manning & Phiddian 2004).

For much of the 19th century, political cartoons wielded tremendous influence in political campaigns because, along with hand-drawn portraits, they were the only candidate pictures to which voters had access (Gilgoff 2008). The advent of photographs in the early 20th century and the birth of television in the 1950s arguably gave political cartoons more competition for attention and reduced their sway (Gilgoff 2008). More recently, readership of political cartoons has declined further as a result of Internet access and spin-doctored ‘grabs’ on current affairs infotainment television (Katz 2004), rather than through reading newspapers. Indeed, the circulation of newspapers in Australia over the last 25 years has declined more than any other comparable country: down from 323 per 1000 population in 1980 to 162 per 1000 population in 2000 (Tiffen 2006). As a result, contemporary politicians may be less apprehensive about static images in newspapers, which may or may not be read by those that they wish to influence, and more concerned with ubiquitous television images.

Despite rhetorical suggestions to the contrary, empirical research has failed to demonstrate the extent to which political satire directly or indirectly influences the views of its readership or wider political discourse. However, there is some evidence that less controversial images and subjects are replacing opinionated cartoons which grabbed the readers’ attention and depicted the message first and the humour second (Fiore 2004; Oliphant 2004). That is, the ‘tone’ of political cartoons (characterised using a theoretically informed taxonomy by Press 1981 and Manning & Phiddian 2004 and described in the Methods section of this paper) varies over time and also according to the cartoonist, media form or targeted audience. Oliphant (2004) argues

that the increasing corporatisation of newspapers, bottom line journalism and the shift in focus from serving the public to serving the shareholders, is a potential reason that controversial cartoons are on the decline. That is, ‘making waves’, offering an opinion, or confronting the readership, decreases circulation and jeopardises profitability, which explains why controversial cartoons that confront are not published as readily as they once were (Fiore 2004; Kercher 2006; Oliphant 2004, p. 25). Apart from caricatures of white males, political correctness has also proscribed most other stereotypes historically reflected in print forms of political satire (‘The ink of human kindness’ 1994).

Despite these challenges, political cartoonists still reach hundreds of thousands of people each day and have the opportunity to connect with readers over a variety of issues in a way that the print journalist cannot. In Australia for example, syndicated political cartoons continue to be published in most major daily newspapers and *Insiders*, the flagship political television program of the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), dedicates a segment to ‘cartoons of the week’. The furore over self-censorship and subsequent violence which was sparked by the publication of twelve editorial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad in 2005 in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, is a salient, albeit highly publicised example of how responses to political cartoons reflect moral tolerance or criticism and questions about freedom of expression (see Laegaard 2007). Benson (2005) also writes that the significance of the political cartoon is sometimes even greater than its potential to initiate thinking and debate, and lies more in its role of encapsulating moments in history in a clear and, on occasion, iconic manner. Consistent with this view, commentators have long noted that satire always emerges at particular times and places, as a political and historical record (Edwards 2007; Griffen 1994). Given the historic change in the Australian political landscape over the last ten years, this is an intriguing vantage point from which to explore the tone and content of political cartoons drawn in Australia.

In summary, the attrition of newspapers, the influence of publishers and advertisers over newspaper content, and the overwhelming number of images that the public encounters every day, have led to a time of uncertainty for the political cartoonist. Importantly however, these same factors suggest that political cartoonists, more than ever before, need to offer clear, accurate insights to complex issues (Katz 2004). That is, the special privilege that cartoonists have traditionally had in our society—the licence to mock and be ‘extravagantly critical of people and institutions in public life’ (Manning & Phiddian 2004, p. 26), may be even more crucial and indispensable in such an uncertain environment. As practising cartoonist David Pope (2006) asserts, to play even a small role in influencing opinion, to galvanise support for certain issues, or to highlight minority public opinion, is still an important one.

## Industrial relations in Australian politics

The previous Coalition Government in Australia, in particular former Prime Minister, John Howard, long held the view that ‘reforming’ employment legislation was an essential part of the modernisation of the industrial relations system and that deregulation of the workforce was a central part of building a strong, sustainable economy (Ellem et al. 2005; Kelly, cited in Norington 2006). The Coalition Government had introduced some changes to the Industrial Relations Act in 1996, but required the support of a minor party to pass a ‘diluted’ version of the bill. When the government won an unexpected majority in both houses of parliament in the October 2004 election, industrial relations issues immediately became an area of interest and subsequent action.

With its Orwellian title ‘WorkChoices’, legislation was hastily presented to parliament in November 2005, and the bill was rushed through both houses to prevent significant debate or in-depth analysis by interested parties (Group of 151 Australian Academics 2005, p. 4). The view that the new *WorkChoices* Amendments were primarily political and ideologically driven is underpinned by the buoyant economic and political climate surrounding its introduction. Union density in Australia was at an all time low (at around 21 percent), industrial action had decreased to very low levels, union ‘misbehaviour’ was not evident and the economic conditions in Australia at the time were excellent and did not warrant changes that would necessitate reducing minimum wages (Group of 151 Australian Academics 2005).

The changes to the industrial relations laws via the *Workplace Relations Amendment (WorkChoices) Act* 2005 are vast. The principal features of the legislation are reviewed elsewhere (see, for example, Masterman-Smith & Elton 2007; Stewart 2006). However, five main areas of importance are: the reduction of powers of the independent tribunal, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC); the introduction of the Australian Fair Pay Commission (AFPC) to determine the minimum wage; the reduction of the ‘20 allowable matters’ in award agreements to five minimum conditions; the preference for individual contracts—Australian Workplace Agreements—over collective agreements; and the abolition of unfair dismissal protections in workplaces with fewer than 100 staff.

The Howard Government’s position on *WorkChoices* was that the legislation would replace the ‘fragmented and overlapping’ state and federal industrial relations systems with a fairer, simpler system under one federal jurisdiction (Sheldon & Junor 2006, p. 153). The then government also suggested that the legislation ‘provides more choice and flexibility for employees in the workplace’ (Australian Government 2007), rewards effort and the opportunity to negotiate more family-friendly hours, strengthens the Australian economy and, as a consequence, increases the ability of employers to create more jobs and higher wages (Hall 2006, p. 292).

Despite a concerted effort by the government to sell the changes to industrial relations to the Australian public at a cost of \$55 million (in the first round of advertising, the figure would be substantially greater by the time of the 2007 election), responses to the introduction of the *WorkChoices* legislation were far from pleasing for the government (Bailey & Townsend 2006). Indeed, the government appeared to be caught off guard by the vehemence of opposition to the legislation and the electorate's fearfulness, and so it responded in an arguably poorly developed and contradictory fashion. Examples of such government responses included suggestions that Australia needed the legislation for reasons of economic growth and job creation at a time when the country had not been more prosperous nor enjoyed employment at such high levels. The government also claimed that the five-day working week was outmoded and irrelevant while suggesting that workers and families would hardly notice a difference with the new legislation (Towart 2005). Hence, much of the public opposition to the legislation appeared to be based on principle, rather than perceived personal impact—clearly fertile ground for the satirist's 'core business' of juxtaposing good and evil.

The ACTU campaign designed to counter the government's legislation, 'Your Rights at Work—Worth Fighting For', was well co-ordinated and struck a chord with the general public (Towart 2005). The unions were disciplined in their responses, and took a long term, grass roots approach to overcoming the laws. They refrained from strike action and appealed to ordinary Australians' belief in a 'fair go' and 'looking after your mates'. The aspirational voters that gave Howard decisive wins in previous elections (Greenfield & Williams, 2001, p. 32) were the voters who were central to the 2007 election (Williams 2008). Consequently, the Australian Labor Party seemed buoyed by the conflict that *WorkChoices* had created in the public arena and exploited the link between the *WorkChoices* debate (amongst other issues) and the decline in John Howard's popularity.

The Howard Government responded to some of the negative perceptions around the introduction of *WorkChoices* by replacing Kevin Andrews with Joe Hockey as the Workplace Relations Minister on 23 January 2007. According to many commentators, the affable Mr Hockey was promoted in an attempt to better sell the unpopular legislation. In addition, government ministers attempted to bring the debate back to one centred around the economic benefits of the legislation. Debate about employee choice and flexibility were replaced with attempts to paint the changes as necessary to keep the Australian economy competitive.

In the November 2007 election, the choice between retaining the Coalition Government and the *WorkChoices* legislation, or to vote for the alternative government, the Australian Labor Party, which promised to abolish the legislation, appeared relatively simple. At least that is what the election results indicate. The Coalition parties lost 21 of their 86 seats (there are 150 seats in total, 76 must be won

to hold office) and the ALP won 23 more than their existing 60 seats to win the election. In this comprehensive defeat, the Prime Minister lost his own seat, an event which occurred for only the second time in the history of Australia's federation. In the post-mortem views of many members of the defeated government, the *WorkChoices* laws were fundamentally important in the election result (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2008).

### **The current study**

The political power of the Australian federal government between July 2005 and November 2007 allowed the introduction of new and controversial industrial relations laws. If political cartoons contribute to an understanding of politics and political processes, a consideration of how history is being represented in the cartoons that were created at the time of the introduction of the new legislation is poignant and timely. As such, the following research questions were explored:

1. What was the tone of political satirical cartoons published in mainstream newspapers in Australia during the introduction of the *WorkChoices* legislation?
2. What content did the cartoons depict in communicating the contentious legislation?

The study analyses the political cartoons created around the industrial relations issue to determine whether they hold the potential to 'lodge a caustic point in the minds of the readers with an indelible effect' (Lewis 2003, p. 27). Whilst the study is necessarily descriptive in examining the cartoons and does not measure or assess their potency or impact *per se*, we do offer an explanation of why political cartoons may continue to have a significant, if waning, role in modern society.

### **Methods**

#### ***Sample and Procedure***

The sample consisted of 107 cartoons from fifteen renowned Australian cartoonists whose works are regularly printed in the editorial pages of five Australian daily newspapers with wide circulation—*The Australian* (national), *The Weekend Australian* (national), *The Sydney Morning Herald* (New South Wales), *The Courier Mail* (Queensland) and *The Age* (Victoria). These newspapers are owned by the two major newspaper groups in Australia: Fairfax and News Limited, and represent approximately 40 per cent of total newspaper sales. Further, some of the sample cartoons appeared concurrently in regional newspapers and professional or trade journals and union periodicals. Only cartoons available on the cartoonists' websites were included in the sample. As such, we used a convenience sample, in the sense that we did not search microfiche records or newspaper archives. However, the wide

circulation of the newspapers sampled and the number of cartoons and cartoonists represented suggested the sample is broadly representative of *WorkChoices* cartoons published in major Australian newspapers at the time.

To be included in the sample, the cartoons needed to clearly depict a message about the new industrial relations legislation and to have been published during a significant phase in the wider debate. The sample of cartoons were taken from 1 June 2005, when the Coalition Government was about to gain control of the Senate and thus had the power to introduce the laws without needing to negotiate support for its legislation, and 27 March 2006, when the legislation became law.

### ***Analysis***

To answer the questions of how political cartoons about the *WorkChoices* legislation were depicted, and how these features might differentially inform the public, cartoons were coded according to both tone and content. Tone was coded using a four category framework initiated by Press (1981, p. 75) and expanded upon by Manning and Phiddian (2004). The first category is Descriptive cartoons, which Manning and Phiddian (2004) suggest are almost neutral in approach. These cartoons are not overtly political and do little more than state the obvious about a situation or event, albeit with a little humour (Press 1981, p. 75). The situations or events depicted within this category can probably not be changed by political activity (Press 1981).

The second category is Laughing Satirical. This category of cartoons is described by Manning and Phiddian (2004, p. 28) as an integral part of the political debate in stable liberal democratic countries. Cartoons in this category have a ‘corrective’ tone, indicating that although the political system that the cartoonist is commenting about is generally viewed as legitimate, there is a need for reform, and for politicians and the powerful to modify their actions. It is Press’ (1981) view that most cartoons fit this category. While he noted that there were variants to this type of cartoon—those that were ‘somewhat more serious, but are critical in about the same measure of laughing satire’ (1981, p. 76)—Press felt it was not necessary to create a further category. This issue was taken up by Manning and Phiddian (2004, p. 31) who argued that Press’ reluctance to differentiate the many cartoons that are laughing satirical lead to an unnecessarily cumbersome category. Accordingly, Manning and Phiddian propose an additional category, which we employ here: Savage Indignation.

Cartoons that depict Savage Indignation are ones in which the cartoonist’s intent is to seek ‘revision of the world without demanding revolution’ (Manning & Phiddian 2004, p. 32). The tone of these cartoons is more urgent and there is a sense that the issues covered are of grave concern. The cartoonists are expressing their alarm at the distribution of wealth and power (Manning & Phiddian 2004) and the urgent need for action on the issue at hand.

The fourth category used to determine tone in this study is Destructive Satirical. These cartoons are described as ‘revolutionary’ and do not accept the legitimacy of the political system about which they comment. They are often found in newspapers or journals distributed to members of activist groups and rarely found in mainstream media. It is considered that the revolutionary fervour driving these types of cartoons means they have little political influence because their receptive audience is too small (Manning & Phiddian 2004).

We also categorised cartoons according to content or central subject matter to explore the nature of industrial relations issues depicted. Because the study is exploratory, and there is no existing coding frame with which to examine subject matter, we developed these categories inductively by reading and re-reading the cartoons to reveal emergent themes. Content categories consisted of:

- *Business Power.* This category depicted images of the relationships and power structures between employers and employees that the cartoonist communicated as currently existing, or that would become evident once the impact of the legislation was apparent.
- *Government Approach.* This category depicted the way in which the legislation was enacted, often showing the ideological motivations described by, for example, Ellem and colleagues (2005).
- *Responses.* This category depicted both the organised (for example, unions and political opposition) responses and other responses (including some depictions of public inaction) that were a result of the introduction of the legislation.
- *Future of Society.* This category revealed cartoons depicting the employment conditions, societal structures and values that were likely to change as a result of the reforms.

Although we used an existing framework for coding cartoon tone, it was important for us to have a common understanding of the categories within this framework and to establish inter-rater reliability (Meadows & Morse 2001). To achieve this, we each coded the cartoons in the sample independently and then met to discuss the consistency of coding (Laughing Satirical and so on), which was around 80 per cent. We discussed those cartoons we had given different codes, and resolved our disagreements. A caveat to this strategy is noted by Manning and Phiddian (2004, p. 32), who state that it is impossible to be too rigid about categorising cartoons because using the taxonomy requires interpretive judgment and not all readers will interpret the message of a cartoon in the same way. Similarly, the cartoons’ content was decided using an iterative approach whereby we coded independently and then met to discuss emergent themes. Content was coded exhaustively. Whereas the

majority of cartoons revealed only one central subject matter theme, eighteen cartoons were coded according to two content categories.

## Results

Table 1 shows that most of the cartoons were able to be classified into one content category ( $n = 89$ ). However, others ( $n = 18$ ) were deemed to have multiple central messages. Those cartoons with multiple lines of content showed a predominantly Savage Indignation tone ( $n = 14$ ). This concentration of multiple lines of content in cartoons with a Savage Indignation tone may arise because issues are presented as fundamentally wrong and the cartoons communicate need for urgent action. Hence, by depicting more than one central message (for example, government deception, business power, loss of workplace rights and entitlements) a cartoon sends the readership a message that multiple important issues are related and salient and that they, as a community or society, need to take action.

**Table 1: Frequency of content and tone categories in political satirical cartoons**

		CONTENT				Total
		Business	Government	Response	Future	
TONE	Descriptive	0	0	0	0	0
	Laughing Satirical	2	21	26	12	61
	Savage Indignation	18	17	6	23	64
	Destructive Satirical	0	0	0	0	0
Total						125

<sup>a</sup> Total is greater than the sample size of 107 because 20 cartoons shared content categories.

Although we used four categories of tone for the analysis, we found that all the cartoons were of two types—Laughing Satirical and Savage Indignation. We coded no cartoons as Descriptive or Destructive Satirical. As we noted above, according to Press (1981) Descriptive cartoons are not overtly political and depict situations and events as though they cannot be changed by political activity. The emotiveness and contentiousness of the *WorkChoices* debate likely demanded that cartoons went beyond mere description. Also absent in the sample was the revolutionary fervour of the Destructive Satirical cartoon; such images probably send too strong a message to the mainstream audience of the daily metropolitan newspapers. The absence of Descriptive and Destructive Satirical cartoons raises two questions which, although not within the scope of this paper, may be usefully explored in future examinations of political satire. First, do cartoonists self-censor to present copy that is more palatable to audiences and/or are they constrained by editorial guidelines? Alternatively, despite self-proclaimed, right-wing commentator Janet Albrechtsen's suggestion that

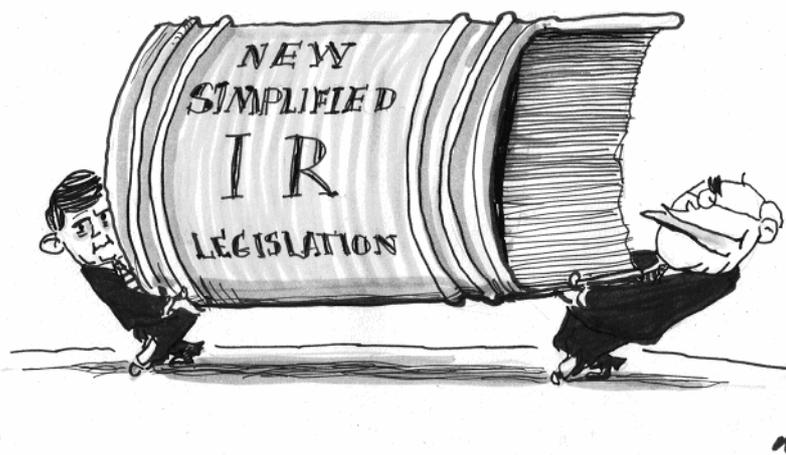
Australian cartoonists have a 'leftist perspective' (Albrechtsen 2007), the cartoonists might simply not be revolutionary ideologues. Second, to what extent are Destructive Satirical cartoons represented in non-mainstream publications such as *Green Left Weekly* and *The Big Issue* when they are not evident in mainstream periodicals?

The cartoons we studied (N = 107) were almost evenly divided between a tone of Laughing Satirical (n = 57) and those that exhibited Savage Indignation (n = 50). Perhaps, it is not surprising that the less 'biting' Laughing Satirical cartoon is represented slightly more often than those that exhibit Savage Indignation. Whilst Laughing Satirical cartoons are corrective in tone, they display more of a sense of 'poking fun' at the issue than cartoons that exhibit Savage Indignation. Hence, the Laughing Satirical cartoons may be 'safer' for mainstream publications to present as satire without the fear of alienating readers. The variation in tone between Laughing Satirical and Savage Indignation cartoons provides further support for Manning and Phiddian's (2004) extension of Press' (1981) framework which includes the use of four categories rather than three.

### ***Laughing satirical cartoons***

Cartoons displaying a Laughing Satirical tone represented 47 per cent of all units of content. The two content categories represented most commonly within Laughing Satirical cartoons were Responses (n = 26) and Government Approach (n = 21). In the Responses content category of Laughing Satirical cartoons, those opposed to the legislation, such as trade unions, the Australian Labor Party and the public, were depicted with a sense of inevitability or helplessness and not as powerful opponents. Rather, opponents were depicted as targets or recipients of whatever impacts might be felt as a result of the legislation.

Cartoons in the Government Approach category often communicated deception associated with the implementation of the legislation and, occasionally, a slightly vulnerable Prime Minister leading the charge. They also presented government deceptiveness as almost expected, occasionally verging on absurd, but certainly not worthy of too much contempt. Figure 1 is an example of this cartoon. It depicts diminutive caricatures of Prime Minister Howard and the Minister for Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews, struggling under the weight of a ridiculously large book titled 'New Simplified IR Legislation'. This is clearly a satirical slap at the government's insistence that the more than 1,400 pages of legislation was a simpler framework than the existing legislation.

**Figure 1. Alan Moir**

Nine Laughing Satirical cartoons in the Responses content category contained central messages about the role of the public in responding to the legislation. All nine of these cartoons were about the vulnerability of workers, and four showed the public as passive and unthinking, with little chance of changing the situation or making a difference. However, five cartoons about public responses illustrated some strength and a more active voice in reactions to the legislation. These messages were consistently presented through cartoons that depicted employee collectivity, that is, employees were drawn as groups of people rather than individuals.

The depiction of collectivism as the only form of effective response is consistent with a large attendance of Australians in capital cities and regional towns at the National Day of Community Protest in November 2005<sup>1</sup>. Illustrations showing collective resistance were also in contrast to the former government's claim at the time that every individual has the bargaining strength and capacity to negotiate individual workplace agreements with their employers or their employers' representatives, even if the employer is a multi-national corporation. Indeed, one of the central tenets of *WorkChoices* was to make individual contracts the principle instrument for setting wages and working conditions, thereby relegating collective agreements to the dustbin of history. This line of argument was strongly opposed by unions and other interested parties who argued that individual contracts would

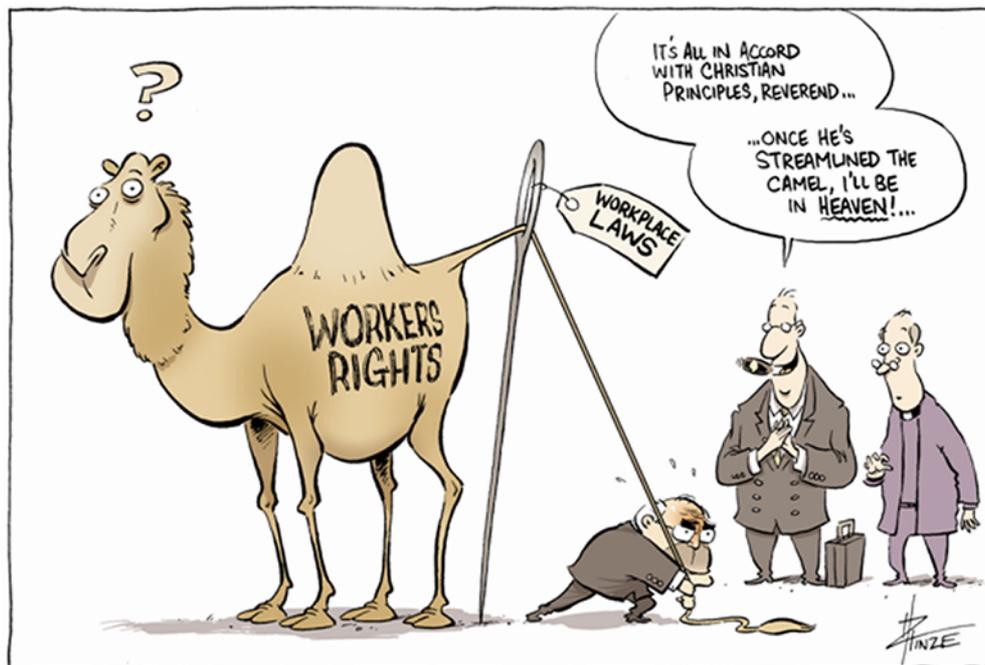
---

<sup>1</sup> Union estimates put the figure at 500,000 (Australian Council of Trade Unions 2005).

disadvantage working Australians. The former government bowed to this pressure and, in May 2007, introduced a 'fairness test' of all individual agreements. In essence, this change re-introduced a formal process that existed before the *WorkChoices* legislation when individual agreements were required to pass a 'no disadvantage' test which ensured that rights were not being stripped from employees. The collectivism conveyed in active public response in Laughing Satirical cartoons is in stark contrast to the Savage Indignation cartoons about Business Power and the vulnerability of workers discussed in the next section. In these cartoons, working people were drawn invariably as single workers pitted against a powerful boss (or three!).

Laughing Satirical cartoons were less likely than Savagely Indignant cartoons to depict Business Power. Figure 2 is one example however, of a cartoon that demonstrates the 'big business' influence over government. At a time when representatives from Australia's major religious groups spoke out in opposition to the legislative reforms, this cartoon draws on the Christian biblical quote that 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' (Matthew 19:24).

Figure 2. David Pope



Another sub-group of Laughing Satirical cartoons contains those depicting the federal opposition's response to the laws. Invariably, the cartoons show the opposition capitalising on public antipathy to *WorkChoices* and suggest that the industrial relations issue could be exploited by the opposition to improve their

standing in the opinion polls. Not one cartoon we studied portrays the opposition as genuinely ideologically opposed to the laws but rather as cynically utilising the contentiousness of the issue to gain momentum in the polls. This stance of the opposition is particularly interesting given the Australian Labor Party is the party-political opposition in Australia. More importantly, the ALP was established in 1891 first and foremost as the political arm of the labour movement within Australia. If the ALP were still committed to these ideological roots then the ideological opposition to the anti-union legislation would surely be more obvious. However, the cynical, satirical cartoons appear to recognise the lack of principled opposition and the absence of this ideology speaks volumes. In a similar way to Laughing Satirical cartoons, which convey the message that deception and outright lies are almost acceptable (because that is what governments do), those that depict the opposition's position have a similar flavour. That is, the cartoons seem to indicate that the political opposition (the ALP) cynically exploits whatever issue suits its purpose to gain traction in the polls. Figure 3 illustrates a typical example of the Laughing Satirical cartoons that depict the party-political opposition. It shows the then leader Kim Beazley realising that the *WorkChoices* provided the opportunity to ride a 'wave' of public opposition, but without a clear direction or effectual leadership.

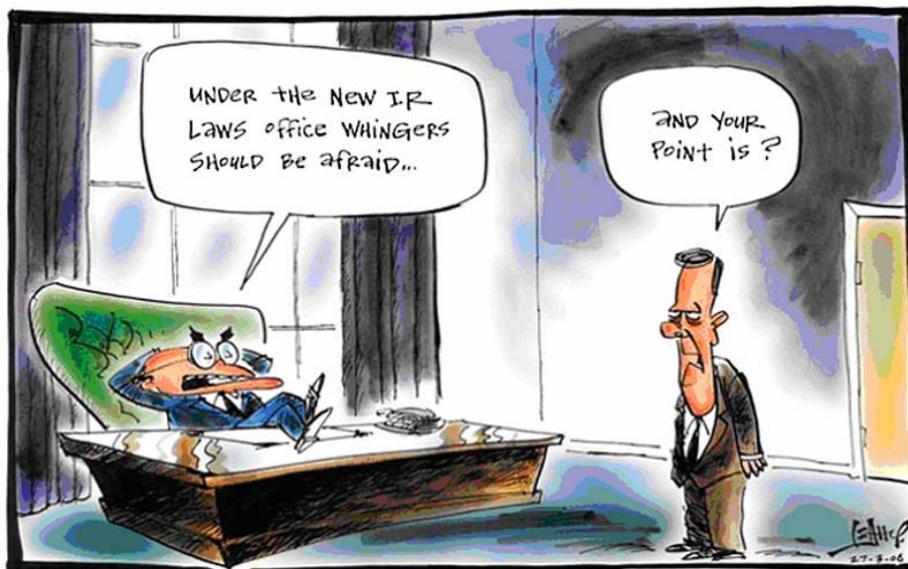
**Figure 3. Peter Nicholson from *The Australian***



Also noteworthy in cartoons depicting a Response to the legislation by unions, the opposition or the public, were that they were almost all of a Laughing Satirical tone. This finding reflects cartoons that were gentler, rather than scathing. In addition, cartoons depicting union responses were lighter, more humorous and less serious than other content categories such as government strategy or the power of business. If we accept that the fundamental purpose of the political satirical cartoon is to illuminate inequities and challenge the powerful in society, it is probably not surprising that cartoon content related to those with less power, such as the political opposition and the public, will be lighter and less serious. Alternatively, cartoons clustering in this area may signify a sense of alarm from cartoonists about complacency in some sectors of the community when it comes to protecting their workplace rights.

Figure 4 is an example of a Laughing Satirical cartoon with content representing the future of society. The comfortable and relaxed Prime Minister is mentioning to his Deputy, Peter Costello, that ‘under the new IR laws, office whingers should be very afraid’. This is a reflection on concerns that were expressed by unions and the media about the new unfair dismissal laws that purportedly enabled employers to sack workers for no reason other than personality clashes. Hence, the implication is that ‘office whingers’ will have to stop complaining under the new laws or they will be dismissed. The depiction of Deputy Costello as the office whinger is also central to the message of the cartoon. Throughout many years leading up to the 2007 election, there was a great deal of media and public interest in deals allegedly made between Howard and Costello over leadership of the parliamentary Liberal Party. Throughout this time, Costello was presented in the media as a complainer who should either challenge for the leadership or remain quiet.

**Figure 4. Sean Leahy**



### *Savage indignation cartoons*

The tone of the Laughing Satirical images varied substantially from the cartoons within the Savage Indignation category. The greater sense of urgency in cartoons demonstrating Savage Indignation demands that the reader reflect more deeply on the distribution of power, wealth and justice and aims to say ‘this act/inaction is rotten. Any citizen of good faith must concentrate on fixing this blight’ (Manning & Phiddian 2004, p. 32). These cartoons conveyed content associated with (i) changes to structures and employment conditions that affect the Future of Society, (ii) concern at the greater imbalances in power between employers and workers that would emerge as a result of the introduction of the laws (Business Power), and (iii) an arrogant Government Approach in using political opportunity to force ideologically driven legislation at a time when little evidence indicated the need for change.

Savage Indignation cartoons that depicted the Future of Australian Society showed images related to the erosion of values that have underpinned Australian society. Most of these cartoons depicted the rolling back of long accepted work conditions such as annual leave, penalty rates and fair minimum wages, and communicated that a fair balance between paid work and non-work activities and responsibilities was in jeopardy. An illustration of these issues is clearly depicted in Figure 5. The cartoon shows that at a time when concerns about terrorism were high and were arguably being used as a means of creating a political climate of fear, the government was using the legislation to strip workers’ rights while members of the public sat by, pre-occupied by television. Of the 23 Savage Indignation cartoons in the Future of Society category, 21 were concerned with the implications of the laws upon the lifestyle of working Australians, their working conditions, and how this would change their underlying beliefs about a ‘fair’ Australia. Of the remaining two cartoons, one was about John Howard’s 1950s view of the world (which was part of the Opposition’s rhetoric at the time) and one showed the impact of the laws on the functions of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

Because cartoons are argued to assist interpretation of socially constructed moral virtues (Condren 1997; Griffin 1994), understanding the politics and public debates of the time is essential for the reader to adequately understand a cartoon’s message. Figure 6 has many important dimensions including ‘the back door’, the sign looking for ‘skilled workers’, the ‘workplace agreement’ that requires signatures and the confused ‘migrant workers’. At the time of publication, central to the *WorkChoices* legislation was the primacy of the AWA or ‘workplace agreement’, concerns within Australia over shortages of skilled labour, and public debates about various means of immigrants ‘skipping the queue’ and entering Australia through the backdoor. The cartoonist has been able to tie these diverse themes into one poignant image, clearly displaying savage indignation over the future of Australia’s society.

Figure 5. David Pope



Figure 6. Paul Zanetti



Cartoons reflecting Business Power were overwhelmingly concerned with the imbalance of influence and control between employees and employers and in workplace structures. One aspect of this power imbalance was the consistent depiction of 'big business' as increasingly authoritarian. Generally, the representation of the capitalist employer was as gluttonous, unfair and sinister. However, although there was substantial public and media debate on the costs and benefits of the new legislation to small and medium sized businesses, especially the abolition of unfair dismissal for workplaces with fewer than 100 staff (Stewart & Williams 2007; Wilson 2006), the cartoons we studied did not address the issue of the power balance between employers and employees in small and medium sized enterprises.

The other aspect of the power imbalance between business and workers was the depiction of challenges to what is rhetorically understood as the Australian 'fair go' and employees' rights in the workplace. Cartoons frequently showed the vulnerability of the family unit and the lack of control of the working person. Like the Response category in Laughing Satirical cartoons, images conveying increasingly unequal Business Power and the vulnerability of employees depict workers as single agents with little chance of making an impact against an unscrupulous employer, rather than as a collective group who might be powerful enough to overturn the new laws. An example is shown in Figure 7, with the bloated, greedy representative from 'big business' sitting comfortably in an elevated, high back, leather chair with the prime minister. Together they are espousing the collective line to the public (who are drawn as physically diminutive) that they can be trusted and that these changes to the law will culminate in a fairer, higher-waged Australia. Clearly, the cartoonist is suggesting to the readership that if they think big business has their interests at heart, then they are extremely gullible. Overt statements about mistrusting large employers were also evident in two cartoons where employers were shown as lying to their employees.

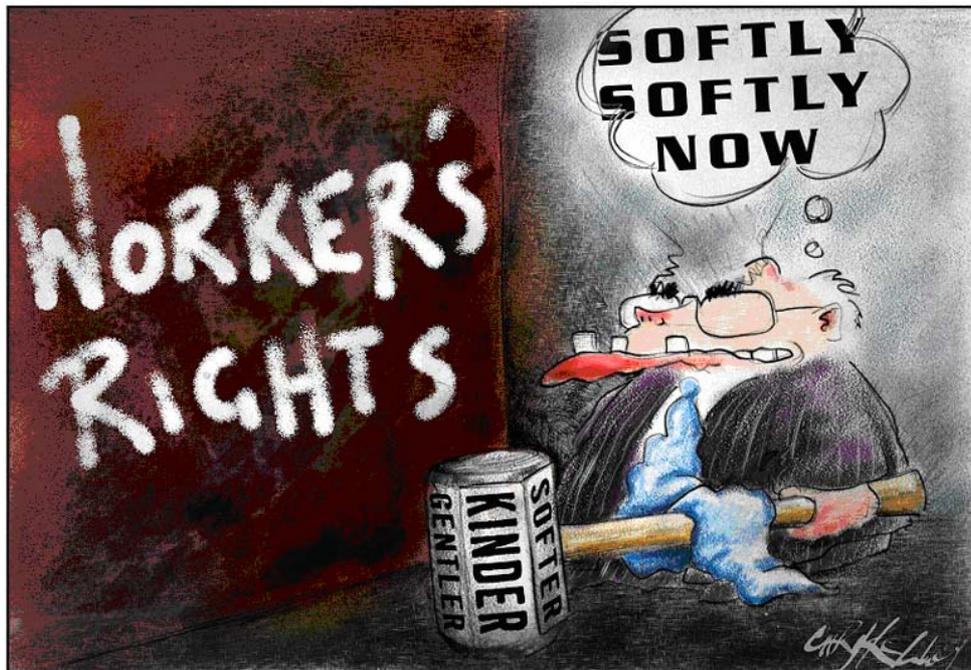
Figure 7. Sean Leahy



The overwhelming majority of cartoons depicting Business Power were associated with the Savage Indignation tone (18) while only two cartoons depict Business Power in the Laughing Satirical style. The cartoonists' intent to examine urgently power structures in organisations is also more scathing than gentle lampooning of the federal government's abuse of its power, as if the latter is normal and expected. Seemingly, this is simply 'what governments do' and is therefore not worthy of a great deal of contempt. However, the study indicates that the cartoons depicting Business Power, particularly, those which illustrated unbalanced power structures, *are* worthy of contempt.

Seventeen of the Savage Indignation cartoons focused on Government Approach. These cartoons tended to depict one of two themes. The first was the perception that the government had lied (or at least been economical with the truth) about the nature and impacts of the legislation. Three cartoons conveyed an untruthful approach to the implementation of the legislation. The second was concerned with the 'steamroller' approach to realising an ideologically driven industrial relations agenda. Thirteen cartoons depicted the apparently relentless pursuit of the government's industrial relations dogma. Figure 8 illustrates the Government Approach content category and shows the Prime Minister with a 'softer, kinder, gentler' sledgehammer about to attack the wall of worker's rights. This can be interpreted as a demonstration of the ideological fervour with which this legislation was conceived, drafted, and passed through parliament, arguably without adequate consideration of the impact that the laws would have on the rights of working Australian citizens.

Figure 8. Chris Kelly



The final subgroup of cartoons with a Savage Indignation tone were about Responses. In contrast with Laughing Satirical cartoons, which conveyed reactions by unions, the political opposition and the general public, cartoons in the Savage Indignation category only showed responses by unions and organised interest groups. The images of unions suggests that their responses to the industrial relations legislation, and to the government which developed and implemented them, was stronger, more active and had greater potency than responses from the political opposition or the public. Indeed, three of these six cartoons conveyed the union movement as an active participant that was gaining strength from the debate. The remaining three cartoons depicting the union movement showed them, both figuratively and literally, as out-dated dinosaurs.

As intimated in Figure 2, some more ‘conservative’ groups within society also voicing concerns with the legislation. This is depicted in Figure 9, in which the cartoonist shows the strength of the mass response with what the Prime Minister is referring to as ‘out-of-touch extreme radicals’. These extremists are two of the major Christian church groups (Catholic and Anglican churches), the Returned Servicemen’s League (RSL), conservative Coalition Senator Barnaby Joyce, and the morally conservative political party, Family First. In the preceding decade, members of these groups would have typically been part of the Howard Government’s more supportive constituency.

**Figure 9. Paul Zanetti**



## Conclusion

This study examined the organisation of one form of contentious popular culture images within mainstream media—political, satirical cartoons—that illustrated changes to the industrial relations system in Australia in 2005 and 2006. Political satirical cartoons representing current events in the public interest have rarely been investigated. Political satire, in the form of cartoons, has been espoused as an important part of liberal democratic society; however, the role and significance of cartoons has been debated in recent times (Hogan 2001; Manning & Phiddian 2004). Traditionally, cartoons have informed by presenting complex political issues that affect peoples' lives in a way that is easily understood, primarily using cynicism towards those in government and others with power. Whilst this study did not test the strength of the cartoonist's influence which may well have waned since the halcyon days of the print media, it does maintain that the relevance of satire (in the case of cartoons) is likely to remain (and evolve) for some time to come when it comes to contentious political issues that are relevant to election debates.

We have demonstrated that the presentation of images in traditional media outlets, such as newspapers and the websites of cartoonists who publish through this forum, exhibit particular tones. No cartoons were simply Descriptive; most cartoons take the Laughing Satirical and Savage Indignation tones. This concentration is probably related to the contentiousness of the issue, which was obvious in the determination of the government to get the legislation through the Senate, the vehement opposition by unions, and the extensive media coverage highlighting the potential short- and long-term impacts on working Australians. The emotiveness and strength of these debates seemed to demand cartoons that went beyond mere description. However, the powerful and concentrated revolutionary messages that Destructive Satirical cartoons portray were not found in this study either. This finding is not unexpected, given that the sample was confined to mainstream, corporatised media where such cartoons are unlikely to be accepted by editors.

Although there has been significant power concentration through the mainstream media outlets, there remains some sovereignty for the cartoonists to exercise freedom of expression. One would expect, however, that there are limits to the degree that influential and authoritative media owners will allow the mocking of the powerful. Certainly, cartoonists can communicate, as the Savage Indignation images do, 'there's something wrong here and it should be changed', but Manning and Phiddian (2004) suggest that, done too often, Savage Indignation cartoons can descend into 'alarmist preachiness'. That is to say, the moral judgements recognised by Condren (1997; 2002) and Griffin (1994) can grow wearying to the readership and, as a result, the savage indignation may lose its critical edge. The potential for this descent is apparent in the sample, given the fact that almost half of the sample cartoons fell into the Savage Indignation category, though the tone of indignation

also indicates the salience and urgency of the issue in the cartoonists' views. In summary, the way in which popular culture images of industrial relations reform were conveyed in Australia were moderate in tone. That is, they were more about poking fun at and questioning authority and power, rather than simply describing the issues on one hand, or demonstrating any revolutionary fervour on the other.

Cartoon content in depicting industrial relations issues fell into four thematic areas: the increasing imbalance of power between large organisations and their employees (Business Power); the manner in which the Coalition Government rolled out the legislation (Government Approach); the nature of public, union and political opposition responses to the development and enactment of the legislation (Responses); and the impact of the legislation on the conditions, structures and values associated with paid work in the future (Future of Society). In sum, the cartoons' content represented many of the concerns and issues being voiced by employer groups, government, opposition, unions and the media at the time. The content was also consistent with common threads of concern being expressed in the academic literature (for example, Freyens & Oslington 2005; Group of 151 Australian Academics 2005; May, Campbell & Burgess, 2005). These concerns included the potential for increasing insecurity of employment for many workers (Future of Society), the thirst for power of some business leaders (Business Power), the active or passive responses from the public and the union movement (Responses) and the blinded ideological approach to the introduction of the legislation (Government Approach). In this sense the cartoons reflected broader contemporary debates, though some consistent themes may also have prompted a strong response from the readership via amateur political commentary (for example, talkback radio, letters to the editors, Internet blogs) or professional political commentary in the mainstream media. Political satire, in all its forms, was supplementary to many other messages being communicated to the public during the introduction of the *WorkChoices* legislation. As such, published cartoons were only a part of the wider political discourse at a tumultuous time in Australia's political history. However, the images depicted, including the importance of a collective response in voicing opposition to the legislation and enacting change, the risks to fundamental working conditions that were posed by the legislation, the stealth, deception and dogma associated with the rollout of the changes, and the increasing disparity in wealth and power between employers and workers, were potentially a very important mechanism through which industrial relations was placed squarely in the minds of working Australians.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge permission to reproduce the cartoons presented in this paper. The sources of the cartoons are as follows:

Figure 1: Alan Moir <http://www.moir.com.au/> (at no cost)

Figures 2 and 5: David Pope <http://www.scratch.com.au/> (at no cost)

Figure 3: Peter Nicholson <http://www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au/>

Figures 4 and 7: Sean Leahy <http://www.leahy.com.au/>

Figures 6 and 9: Paul Zanetti <http://www.zanetti.net.au/>

Figure 8: Chris Kelly <http://www.chriskelly.net.au/>

## REFERENCES

- Albrechtsen, J. 2007, 'Conservatism is no laughing matter', *The Australian*, 3 January, p. 10.
- Australian Broadcasting Commission 2008, Transcript of 'Howard's end', *Four Corners*, 18 February [Online], Available: <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2007/s2162492.htm> [2008, Feb 21].
- Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) 2005, National Day of community protest [Online], Available: [http://www.actu.asn.au/work\\_rights/get\\_involved/index.html](http://www.actu.asn.au/work_rights/get_involved/index.html) [2008, Aug 3].
- Australian Government 2007, WorkChoices website [Online], Available: <http://www.workchoices.gov.au> [2007, May 31].
- Bailey, J., & Townsend, K. 2006, 'Selling WorkChoices to the Australian public', paper presented to the Canadian Industrial Relations Association Conference, Toronto, June 18.
- Benson, T. 2005, 'The greatest political cartoons of all time?', *History Today*, vol. 55, no. 3, pp. 20–23.
- Condren, C. 1997, *Satire, Lies and Politics: The Case of Dr Arbuthnot*, Macmillan Press, Hampshire.
- Condren, C. 2002, 'Between social constraint and the public sphere: On misreading early-modern political satire', *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 79–101.
- Connors, J. 2005, 'Visual representations of the 2004 Presidential campaigns: Political cartoons and popular culture references', *The American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 479–487.
- Edwards, J. 2007, 'Drawing politics in pink and blue', *Political Science and Politics*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 249–253.
- Edwards, J. & Ware, L. 2005, 'Representing the public in campaign media: A political cartoons perspective', *The American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 466–478.

- Ellem, B., Baird, M., Cooper, R. & Lansbury, R. 2005, “WorkChoices”: Myth-making at work’, *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 13–31.
- Fiore, M. 2004, ‘Animation and the political cartoons. These cartoons “can reach inside someone’s brain and grab just the right spot”’, *Nieman Reports*, vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 41–42.
- Freyens, B. & Oslington, P. 2005, ‘The likely employment impact of removing unfair dismissal protection’, *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 56, December, pp. 56–65.
- Gilgoff, D. 2008, ‘Picture power: Cartoonists wield a might pen, especially in election years’, *U.S. News & World Report*, vol. 144, no. 7, p. 38.
- Griffin, D. 1994, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington.
- Greenfield, C. and Williams, P. 2001, “Howardism” and the Media Rhetoric of “Battlers” vs “Elites”’, *Southern Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 32–44.
- Group of 151 Australian Industrial Relations, Labour Market and Legal Academics 2005, Research evidence about the effects of the ‘WorkChoices’ Bill, a submission to the Inquiry into the Workplace Relations Amendment (WorkChoices) Bill 2005 [Online], Available: [http://www.edenmonarolabour.org/yraw/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=docview&gid=1](http://www.edenmonarolabour.org/yraw/index.php?option=com_docman&task=docview&gid=1) [2008, Aug 1].
- Hall, R. 2006, ‘Australian industrial relations in 2005—The WorkChoices revolution’, in *Industrial Relations—A Current Review*, ed. R. Hall, Sage, London, pp. 1–12.
- Hogan, M. 2001, ‘Cartoonists and political cynicism’, *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 27–50.
- Katz, H. 2004, ‘An historic look at political cartoons: The future of editorial cartooning in America is uncertain, but the past holds lessons for us all’, *Nieman Reports*, vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 44–46.
- Kercher, S. 2006, *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Kernan, A. 1959, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Koelble, T. & Robins, S. 2007, ‘Zapiro: The work of a political cartoonist in South Africa—Caricature, complexity and comedy in a climate of contestation’, *Political Science & Politics*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 315–318.
- Laegaard, S. 2007, ‘The cartoon controversy: Offence, identity, oppression?’, *Political Studies*, vol. 55, no. 3, pp. 481–489.
- Lewis, M. 2003, ‘Cartooning, left and right’, *Commentary*, vol. 116, no. 3, pp. 67–72.
- Manning, H. & Phiddian, R. 2004, ‘In defence of the cartoonists’ licence to mock’, *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 25–42 [Online] Available: <http://www.australianreview.net/journal/v5/n1/manning.pdf> [2008, Aug 1].
- Masterman-Smith, H. & Elton, J. 2007, ‘Cheap labour—The Australian way’, paper presented at the AIRAANZ Conference 2007, Auckland, New Zealand, 7–9 February.

- May, R., Campbell, I. & Burgess, J. 2005, The rise and rise of casual work in Australia: Who benefits, who loses?, paper presented at the seminar on the proposed WorkChoices legislation, The University of Sydney, Sydney, 20 June.
- Meadows, L. & Morse, J. 2001, 'Constructing evidence within the qualitative project', in *The Nature of Qualitative Evidence*, eds J. Morse, J. Swanson & A. Kuzel, Sage, Thousand Oaks, pp. 187–200.
- Norington, B. 2006, 'Unfinished business', in *The Howard Factor*, ed. N. Cater, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, pp. 92–103.
- Oliphant, P. 2004, 'Why political cartoons are losing their influence', *Nieman Reports*, vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 25–27.
- Pope, D. 2006, Is the pen mightier than the sword?, keynote presentation at the *Work Industrial Relations and Popular Culture Conference*, Brisbane, Australia, 25 September.
- Press, C. 1981, *The Political Cartoon*, Fairleigh Dickinson, Rutherford.
- Sheldon, P. & Junor, A. 2006, 'Australian HRM and the Workplace Relations Amendment (WorkChoices) Act 2005', *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 153–170.
- Stewart, A. 2006, 'WorkChoices in overview: Big bang or slow burn?', *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 25–61.
- Stewart, A., & Williams, G. 2007, *WorkChoices: What the High Court Said*, Sydney, Federation Press.
- 'The ink of human kindness' 1994, *The Economist*, vol. 331, no. 7868, 18 June, p. 34.
- Tiffen, R., 2006, 'The press' in *The Media and Communications in Australia*, eds S. Cunningham & G. Turner, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 97–112.
- Toward, N. 2005, 'Framing the debate: The unions' campaign', *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 56, December, pp. 268–276.
- Williams, P. 2008, 'The 2007 Australian federal election: The story of Labor's return from the electoral wilderness', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 104–125.
- Wilson, S. 2005, 'Any attention is bad attention? Public opinion towards the Howard Government's industrial relations reforms in 2005', *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 56, pp. 285–298.