

***Political Cartooning: Does it Matter?
A Review of 'Comic Commentators: Contemporary Political Cartooning in
Australia'***

Edited by Robert Phiddian and Haydon Manning, Symposia Series, Network Book, Perth, WA, 2008, 259 pages, \$34.95

Reviewer: June Verrier

Introduction

If cartoons didn't matter, why would the Danish cartoons of Mohammed have caused international uproar, why would there be fear of the implications of the Australian 2005 sedition laws for them, why would Jenny Macklin have protested so much over the cartoon portrayal of women politicians, why would Michael Hogan fear for their negative impact on political attitudes and participation — and why would they have been such a persistent feature throughout the entire history of the popular press and before it, especially when these have been reduced to the last resort of protest? And why, in enlightened countries, would cartoonists be protected, celebrated and defended so staunchly by editors and presumably their press baron masters even when the tale they tell may diverge markedly from the mainstream of the newspaper in which they appear, and in less enlightened countries be persecuted, thrown into prison — or worse?¹ As British cartoonist Steve Bell said of Barry Blitt's controversial depiction of Barack Obama as 'a smug Muslim and his gun-toting black power wife'² which appeared on the front cover of the *New Yorker* in July 2008, 'cartoons need to be disturbing, and they should also dare to ask questions.' And we can see, if we choose to look, that even in the most benign of political environments, they push boundaries and force us to view issues in a different, usual more critical, way.

In their Introduction to *Comic Commentators*, Phiddian and Manning state that the problem and the opportunity this book presents is that there is not yet a large scholarship on political cartooning in Australia or internationally 'presumably because cartoons do not belong to any particular academic discipline...' p. 2. There is, though, a vast literature on the role that cartoonists play historically, culturally and politically, and in struggles far apart in time and place, especially for basic rights and freedoms taken for granted in western democratic societies. In Australia itself, there are some wonderful historical studies such as Marguerite Mahoud's 'The Loaded Line' and Joan Kerr's 'Artists and Cartoonists in Black and White'. There are also many collections of the work of Australian political cartoonists,

¹ Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali was assassinated in London in 1987.

² 'Can Cartoonists go too far? Yes. Should we go too far? Yes', Steve Bell in *The Guardian* 16/7/08, p. 2

some biographical material, including accounts of cartoonists' working styles, the context in which they work and how this has changed over the years. There is also an increasing celebration of their excellence, for example in the National Museum's exhibition of the annual best now in its eleventh year, and enthusiastic promotion of activities associated with cartooning by Australia's cartoonists themselves in the work of the Australian Cartoonists' Association which, established in 1924, is the oldest of its kind in the world. But questions such as whether cartoons qualify as art, popular culture, political commentary or political communication or, indeed, none of these but just comic relief not to be taken very seriously, or whether cartoons amount to something more that may make them useful tools for political analysis, or anything else, have not, in Australia, generally or systematically been asked. This volume begins to do so, albeit in a discursive way with an eclectic collection of very mixed contributions from quite varied perspectives.

Comic Commentators is compiled by two scholars who through their analyses of political cartooning, particularly in election campaigns over the last twenty years, have arguably done more to put this issue on the political science map in Australia than anyone else³. It includes contributions from five cartoonists, one editor, five academics, one museum curator and one commentator. We are invited to share the perspectives of the insiders, cartoonists deeply engrossed in the political process (Pryor) and the evolution of their craft (O'Neill) to one who wonders why she is there (Katauskas). We also share the reflections of an editor (Ian Matthews) who allows or even encourages his cartoonist to go where journalists dare not go, and are reminded of some constraints by another cartoonist (Moir) who points to the tradition of self-censorship as this was developed by David Low under Lord Beaverbrook on the back of the French King and the pear incident. Between them they tell the story of cartooning as a way of life, for example as this was at *The Australian* over almost half a century (Foyle), cartooning as art — or not — (Hansen), and cartooning as insight and measure (Phiddian and Thomas who focus in particular on Bruce Petty, a cartoonist who throughout this volume is put on a pedestal apart by his peers).

Other contributions discuss cartooning in the context of censorship and the law (Handsley and Phiddian), sexism historically (Sawer) and contemporarily (Manning), or pursue the question of cartoonists' influence on political behaviour (Hogan) and their impact in an election context (Manning). Together the authors ask us to take more seriously than we are usually inclined to do the contribution of some of these powerful consciences of our times in their unrelenting attempt to help us see into the life of political things — and care.

The editors make it clear that this volume makes no claim to be comprehensive. But from a reviewer's perspective, if an objective is to lift cartoon commentary into the toolbox of political analysis, and I think it is, then what is missing in particular is a

³ See footnote 1 ch.10

clear distinction of the status of the independent editorial cartoonist and the link this has to censorship and to influence. Also sadly missing is a chapter which puts Australia's cartooning experience in a comparative or international context. Australia's history and tradition of cartooning, which sprang out of the earth with Australia according to Don Watson,⁴ has evolved in an extraordinarily benign political environment and has been profoundly influenced by this state of affairs. What makes this volume particularly timely is that, apart from periodic attacks of political correctness and fears for bad taste, the most serious threat to its liberal lifeblood came with the sedition laws of 2005. By contrast, cartooning elsewhere, including in other great western democracies, has had to work its way through revolutions, tyrannies and wars which often provided its *raison d'être*, dictated its *modus operandi* and occasionally bent it to their cause.

Independence?: 'telling truth to power', Steve Bell⁵

In so much of the literature on political cartooning including the volume under consideration, we are told of its reactive nature, that cartoonists do not lead but 'encapsulate our existing mood, rather than present us with an alternative view'.⁶ We are also told that they do not reflect majority opinion. It is perhaps in this contradiction that the significance of the editorial cartoonist is lost.

The description 'political cartoons' used in this volume in most cases misses an important distinction, but one made by Ward O'Neill. In his chapter 'Times, Technology and Talent', O'Neill reminds us that illustration and caricature have flourished ever since printed technology first permitted the creation of engraved images for graphic commentary and he suggests these have stood slightly to one side of the political cartoon, the stand alone explicit commentary.

In my time as a caricaturist and illustrator, however, the lines between the two have become blurred because of enabling technological change, an encouraging political climate and the innovative influence of particular artists'. p. 24

While he notes that all can contribute to an impact, an image of a leader, or reflect back to us the times in which we live, it is the editorial cartoonists, those with independence to be commentators, actors or opinion makers in their own right, that are distinctive.

Generally, then, political cartoons include the educative — or propagandistic — cartoon, and represent a venerable tradition used by governments in both of the World Wars of the twentieth century, for example, and used extensively by

⁴ His introduction to ...

⁵ Steve Bell, 'Steve Bell in America', *op. cit.*

⁶ Timothy S Benson, who in his introduction to 'The Cartoon Century'.

organizations such as UNICEF today.⁷ In chapter 8, 'Cartoons for the Cause...', Marian Sawyer, reminds us that, appreciating the value of humour to assist convey a message effectively, Australian Government Departments, led by Peter Wilenski, uniquely and innovatively commissioned cartoonists to assist with the equity agendas in the 1980s. She also reminds us of the impact of what we may call the captive cartoonists at the other end of the twentieth century in her reflections on cartooning and the Suffragettes. Sawyer recalls that the thrust of mainstream press cartooning in those times was designed to keep women in their place, just as those commissioned in counterpoint to present the positives of womens' involvement encouraged the protestors by the ridicule they heaped on those males fearful the social skies would fall in if women were given the vote. Cartoons were in the one case deployed to reinforce and support the establishment and in the other to be subversive of it — because that is what they were paid to do.

The editorial cartoon, by contrast, although inevitably reflecting the major political issue of the day, is generated by the cartoonist as independent commentary and is generally free from editorial direction or interference. Martin Rowson tells us that in the interwar years and after, 'Vicky and Low had their dissidence formalized in their contracts with Beaverbrook on *The Evening Standard*, by which they were given almost total licence to peddle points of view entirely at odds with those not just of the paper's editorial line but also of the readers'. He suggests this is because unlike most (editors), Beaverbrook understood the role of the (political) cartoonist.

In Australia, Joan Kerr has argued that the emergence of the editorial cartoonist is a more recent development.⁸ She tells us that Australia's cartoon industry developed in a very different context from the one in which it now operates. There were the days of 'uncritical acquiescence to editorial demand' as the norm (p. 36). Cartoonists, or perhaps more accurately comic illustrators as she describes them, drew to amuse, reflecting different aspects of society, be this in publications like *Punch* in its various Australian forms, or in *The Bulletin*, which did so much to encourage and support this emerging industry. In contrast to the biting specifics of today's editorial cartoonists, who see their mission to challenge the existing establishment regardless of who currently makes it up, she argues that cartoons once necessarily had more of a timeless quality, mirroring back synoptically and generally society as it was then — or reflecting the dominant culture.

Like artists in earlier times whose living depended entirely on the patronage of the church or of an aristocratic family, cartoons were commissioned to reflect their proprietors' interests and this, necessarily, is what they did. When this changed, Joan Kerr points out that it was the often the self-imposed political correctness of

⁷ In an article on 'Cartooning and democratization world-wide', John A Lent reports that UNICEF has been using animation for more than a decade to bring public awareness to problems such as the plight of the girl child, and Canada's National Film Board made an aids cartoon film to assist with its campaigns in its aid programs.

⁸ In a volume written to accompany an 'Artists in Black and White...'

the 1980s and 1990s that was the limitation. Kerr's history, though, suggests a unilinear and irreversible evolution towards the emergence of the independent editorial cartoonist. But the situation is not as simple as this. She would be surprised, for example, by conclusions that could still be drawn of Canada in 2003 that 'political cartoons are another means whereby powerful interests reinforce their views of society' and that Conrad Black demanded loyalty — or leave.⁹ She may also be surprised by the conclusion more recently drawn by Tony Walker in an article on the influence of cartoonist Pat Oliphant, that editorial cartoonists are an endangered species.¹⁰ And she would certainly turn in her sadly premature grave to learn that in response to sensitivities of Dutch Muslims and the assassination of a film maker, the Dutch Secret Service in 2006 created a division dedicated to checking all cartoons published in the country for their political correctness. This was revealed by Cartoonists Rights Network International on 26 May 2008 in the context of a report on the arrest of freelance cartoonist Gregorius Neskschot for cartoons considered offensive to Muslims.

The likes of Petty according to Mark Thomas in his chapter 'Political Moralists after a Fashion...' sees the task of the editorial cartoonist to be didactic and, as well, to make more difficult any arbitrary exercise of power (p. 242). The huge responsibility the editorial cartoonist carries is also suggested by Pryor for, when all else fails, it is they who are left to 'expose the cant for what it is' (p. 17). A hard look at today's editorial cartoonists suggests that they do not do this flippantly or from a flimsy base. Reading Pryor's chapter, for example, you hear speaking a man intensely involved with his art, astonishingly but unsurprisingly politically well informed given all those years of intense scrutiny up close and personal of the Canberra scene, and vitally concerned about the good health of our polity. This man is not a 'funny' man at all. He uses satire savagely to do precisely what he has just said, i.e. to expose the cant.

Censorship?: 'People see what they want to see in cartoons', Bill Leak¹¹

Cartooning can be seen to be the last resort of free speech and, potentially, always a powerful form of dissent when all others fail — or fail to be deployed. When civil liberties were being chipped away with the raft of laws introduced by the Howard government in response to the terrorist threat, cartoonists joined with those courageous free spirits pointing to the price being paid for the quality of Australian democracy. The independence of the editorial cartoon could not be taken for

⁹ Rhonda Walker, *Canadian Parliamentary*, Vol. 26(1) 2003.

¹⁰ Tony Walker, referring to Chris Lamb's 'Drawn to Extremes...' *Australian Financial Review Magazine*, 31 October 2008 p. 93

¹¹ Leak on his Delacroix parody of Cheryl Kernot, quoted in Haydon Manning's chapter on p. 139

granted. Why, otherwise, in this volume and elsewhere when they have described the context in which they work,¹² would cartoonists invariably raise the censorship issue and how (mostly) free from this they have been fortunate to be in the Australian context?

In his chapter on censorship, Alan Moir reflects on self-censorship and suggests that it was this, this common sense thing, and not any kind of absolute freedom that applied to the great David Low, whose famed freedom from censorship from Lord Beaverbrook has taken on the status of one of the great myths of cartooning history. Low boasted that he was never censored. But of course Low was censored and whether this was always self-censorship is debatable, as his contradictory comments on the absence of his cartoon presence on the affair of the King and Mrs Simpson,¹³ for example, makes clear. In this case and doubtless others, Low was censored by circumstances he well understood. He was also, most notoriously, censored by Hitler and Stalin for his use of ridicule to assist bring them down.¹⁴

Moir cautions that today it is 'bad taste', not so long ago called 'political correctness', which remains the silent censor (p. 59). And so it was 'bad taste' that caused the editor of *The Scotsman* to reject cartoons by Tom Halliday and Martyn Turner on the attack on the World Trade Centre and tell them to draw something less critical of America,¹⁵ and bad taste which required the withdrawal of Ted Rall's cartoon depicting a new widow which appeared briefly on the *New York Times* website.¹⁶ And it is 'bad taste' that limits cartoon activity in a whole range of categories today from religion to racism and all types of group stereotyping where far more reserve is exercised than was the case in the grand old days of the *Sydney Bulletin* for example.

Yet in 'our' kinds of society, some get away with it, like Sean Delonas of the *New York Post* '...whose lawyers are drooling ambulance chasers, his policemen grotesquely fat donut-chompers, his teachers sub-literate, his gay men invariably mincing on tip toe with one knee bent.' Of Delonas Michael J Lewis said: 'rather than tiptoeing around visual stereotypes, Delonas revels in them.'¹⁷ Then there is our own Bill Leak, tilting at the windmills of tolerance or tyranny with his provocative cartoons about women in the wake of the Macklin sexism protest, and of Christ,

¹² See the Ann Turner volume of interviews with 21 Australian Cartoonists, 'In Their Image: Contemporary Australian Cartoonists' published by the National Library of Australia in 2000.

¹³ David Low and the 1936 Abdication Crisis' by Tim Benson, *Cartoon History*...

¹⁴ The latest book on Low includes many of the cartoons that were censored by Hitler and Mussolini during the war...

¹⁵ 'A Cartoonist's Response to the events of 11th September 2001', by Martin Rowson, *Cartoon History* series

¹⁶ 'Cartooning, Left and Right', *Commentary* No 116 No 3 pp. 67-72, 2003.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Mohammed and on Indonesian President SBY when there was cartoon potential to make a political point. Delonas and Leak are throwing down the gauntlet, testing the boundaries of freedoms and perhaps boasting of them, and daring their editors to censor or their subjects to sue.

In their examination of 'Cartoonists and the Law', Handsley and Phiddian explain why they don't. They conclude that the King and the pear principle still prevails; there is very little defamation action against cartoonists (even though it was cartooning that led to the development of the law of criminal libel in the UK in the eighteenth century).¹⁸ In 1832 France, cartoonist Charles Philipon was imprisoned for a caricature of King Louise Philippe as a pear. The issue was the division between satire and subversion. In its pursuit, far greater publicity for the offending image followed than would otherwise have been the case. Moir concludes that after this experience, it became the convention in France, and in most of Europe, to tolerate satirical cartoons, and this convention became a major foundation in the building of the free press in the West (p. 58–9).

Kings, potentates and (most) politicians quickly learnt that complaint about cartoons only exaggerates and prolongs the lampooning and casts its subject in even worse light. Thus cartoonists came to enjoy *de facto* exemption from suit on the back of a link which reaches to the guarantee of freedom of speech in the Constitution. Handsley and Phiddian conclude that the sedition laws of November 2005 are unlikely to change this state of affairs except to trigger more self-censorship, though this may be significant in itself if cartoons are pulled by legal departments fearful of legal reprisal.

The lesson of the King and the pear seems lost on some who protest the portrayal of female politicians today. Haydon Manning courageously tackles this difficult subject in his chapter on 'Australian Cartoonists' Caricatures of Women Politicians', arguing the pros and cons of the case and concluding that '...drawing blood is a licence cartoonist must enjoy if their art is to have integrity and purpose...' (p. 128). We are left wondering whether the essence of the feminist argument, including concepts of 'fair' and 'unfair', are in fact a plea for special treatment, for which read censorship?

Influence?: 'Trying to catch the wind...' Margeurite Mahood

As Margeurite Mahood so delightfully put it the conclusions of her study of 'Australian Political Caricature 1788-1901': 'to ask, as is often done, "To what extent does the political cartoon influence public opinion" is like trying to catch the wind'. If this is the case, then the question of their influence should rest in the

¹⁸ According to the Hon B S J O'Keefe, AM QC, President of the National Trust of Australia (NSW) in his foreword to 'Artists and Cartoonists in Black and White: The most public art', by Joan Kerr, SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney 1999.

domain of the historian and not that of the political scientist. The agonizing about the impact of political cartoonists stems perhaps from the focus on how much they influence individual opinion or behaviour and whether this can be measured instead of what cartoons can tell us about the world in which we live. Phiddian's chapter tracing the first half of Bruce Petty's career at *The Australian* is a wonderful example of the latter, i.e. the value of looking at a period of history through its cartoonists' eyes to draw out the passions and problems, the diversity and the discord, which may sometimes be misrepresented, misunderstood or glossed over in the official histories, or histories written by those who were not there. This is particularly true of situations and societies which are not free.

In 'Comic Commentators' Alan Moir gives cartoonists credit for the achievement of the free press in the West, Ward O'Neill records their impact in war and the influence they had particularly in pushing the boundaries through the sixties, and Lindsay Foyle, in his history of political cartooning at *The Australian*, reminds us that editors-in chief, too, appreciate their impact. Why else, he suggests, would Paul Kelly in this role give 'diligent attention' (p. 228) to the selection of cartoonists if it were not for the incommensurate impact they have in proportion to their number and in contrast to that of the many more journalists who graced its pages?

Foyle also focuses on Petty as cartoonist of perhaps the greatest influence on both his art and his peers, as do Phiddian and Thomas. Robert Phiddian tells us that Petty 'has tried to prick our consciences and make us a more inquisitive people (p. 193). He argues that 'the satirists' aim is to jolt the ... public out of automated assent to the activities of the knaves and fools who wield power' (p. 192). And this is surely what so many of them do. Though Thomas for one concludes it changed nothing, the cartooning of such contemporary greats as Moir, Pryor, Rowe and Leak as well as Petty around Tampa, refugees, the Iraq War, Weapons of Mass Destruction and so on, surely make the point? This was strident, this was angry and this was not just reflecting back what is, but demanding what should be. Editorial cartoonists point out to the punters what governments are doing in their name — to provoke them to think about it.

Influence, then, editorial cartoonists certainly have. H L Mencken, for example, was of the view that 'the contents of the little black box to the right of the editorial often have a more profound impact on public perceptions of people and events than do many column inches of considered argument'.¹⁹ And Lucy Shelton Caswell concludes that 'the North American tradition is to treat editorial cartoons as persuasive communications with the rhetorical force of editorials or op-ed columns'.²⁰ Virginia Bouvier said that they 'reflect and contribute to the formation of political attitudes' and, in his foreword to *Best Australian Political Cartoons 2004*, Russ Radcliffe, that 'if the primary role of the news media is to provide a

¹⁹ In the promotional blurb inside flap of *Best Cartoons 2003*.

²⁰ Quoted in Sleuter and Wills...

check on power, cartooning is often its most potent weapon'. No surprise, then, that Thomas Nast, for example, (US 1840–1902), was seen 'single handedly to be responsible for the downfall of the corrupt New York administration of William 'Boss' Tweed and his Tammany Hall ring.'²¹ And that only David Low and Gabriel, (*nomme de plume* of Jimmy Friell), 'strikingly prescient', provided any sustained opposition to the Government at home and Fascists abroad in the lead up to World War Two, though their warnings were largely ignored.²²

In an article focused on the tribulations of working with interfering editors and the lack of recognition for cartoonists like Peter Brooks and Steve Bell who, in his view, are 'more perceptive, accurate, engaging and succinct analysts of contemporary events than Lord Rees-Mogg, Hugo Young, or any of the rest of them...', British cartoonist, Martin Rowson, deplors the 'systematic failure within newspapers to appreciate that cartoons are serious journalism'.²³ He argues that editors can handle illustrators but worry about cartoonists (for which read editorial cartoonists as defined here) because they do their analytical thinking for themselves and form their own opinion. Rowson argues that if cartoonists are visual columnists 'then by definition they're also opinion formers'. Tony Walker agrees. In an article in the *Financial Review Magazine* of 31 October 2008 on cartoonist Pat Oliphant, he describes him as 'a working journalist who has, arguably, had more influenced on how Americans see themselves — and how outsiders see America in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries than any other Australian, including Rupert Murdoch'.²⁴

Although acknowledging the power of cartoons as the title of his chapter 7 'The Power of Cartoons' suggests, Michael Hogan worries about their fairness, their cynicism and their capacity to contribute to negative feelings in the community about politics.²⁵ So does Mark Thomas ('cartoons can be corrosive' p. 242) in chapter 14. Paradoxically, both, too, doubt their influence or their impact, but with exceptions. Hogan and Thomas, doubtless alert to Bell's iconic image of John Major with underpants outside his trousers, concede that cartoonists can have a profound impact on the image of leadership. Like others, they agree that if a cartoon

²¹ 'Steve Bell in America', reflecting on his attendance at an AAEC Convention in Pittsburg in 2003, after which he concludes how much more organized and serious about protecting their rights etc are the American editorial cartoonist)

²² Peter Mellini, 'Fallen Angel The political cartoons of Jimmy Friell', Cartoon History, <http://www.politicalcartoon.co.uk/html/histoty/fallen-angel.html>

²³ 'We, the Cartoonists, are the True Outsiders of Journalism', Cartoon History....He said he sees himself as a visual journalist rather than any kind of 'artist'. Martin Rowson is a cartoonist on *The Guardian*.

²⁴ Tony Walker, op. cit. Walker also refers to Chris Lamb's book, 'Drawn to Extremes: The Use and Abuse of Editorial Cartoons', Columbia UP 2004, the very title of which suggests the power and impact of the editorial cartoon.

²⁵ 'Cartoonists and Political Cynicism', *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, Vol. 2(1), July 2001 pp. 27–50

can capture in a single image a message about weakness, stupidity, indecisiveness, or, indeed anything else, and these images are picked up and become the standard, they can make — or break — a leader. Ward O'Neill p. 31 concludes, 'As Finey made Jack Lang, Tanner made Henry Bolte'. Similarly, it was cartoonists, surely, who fixed an image in the public mind, and so spoke volumes, with their portrayal of the granite Easter Island faced Fraser, the lightweight Peacock, the imperial Keating, the caught-in-the-head-lights Beazley, the bullying Latham, the malicious, mendacious, ordinary John Howard, and Kevin Rudd, so far the round faced whimsical innocent abroad, pack on back off to seek his adventures in the big wide wicked world.

Democratic Indicator?: 'Every joke is a tiny revolution', George Orwell

It is called 'our most democratic art form'²⁶ but we treat it lightly. In this volume only Marian Sawyer points to the potential of cartooning 'for the cause' in her chapter of this name. It can be argued that the relevance of political cartooning historically, culturally and politically, yesterday, today and tomorrow is centered on its value as an agent to expose or to demonstrate or to subvert and, if not assist, then to reflect (the need for) political change. Put another way, political cartooning can be seen as one form of political — or cultural — communication.

There would be room in a volume like this for a chapter illustrating the very activist and vibrant culture of cartooning to be found perhaps especially in countries in which democratic freedoms are most in question. Political cartoonists, far apart in time and place, have for long been part of the armoury of resistance in the struggle for basic democratic freedoms and in return have been subject to corresponding restrictions from the regimes which generate them. It is not too long a bow to draw therefore between the condition — or depiction — of the editorial cartoonists and the democratic good health of a society. Don Watson grimly concludes, 'where there is no democracy, there are no cartoons'. Indeed satire is banned in North Korea, and in Burma in June 2008 Zarganar, a famous comedian, who has attracted a wide following by mocking its military rulers, was also banned.²⁷

'Comic Commentators' reminds us of the long, strong and proud Australian history of cartooning — including as export.²⁸ How is it that our cartoonists seem to us so remarkable ('the best!'), enjoy a forthrightness, an in-your-face, take no prisoners style which sets it apart, or at least suggests some strong comparisons with other countries/cultures which appear, at least at first, to be more bound by the restraints

²⁶ Russ Radcliffe in his foreword to 'Best Australian Political Cartoons 2003'.

²⁷ Ben McIntyre op cit.

²⁸ Australasia has been the source of a good number of cartoonists who have gone on to fame and fortune in Europe and America (David Low, Pat Oliphant, Les Gibbard, Paul Rigby, Will Dyson...).

of deference and respect — or worse? Look at the UK, at least until the 1960s, where royalty, for example, invariably met with gentle treatment at cartoonists' hands. Look at Japan still, where one recent analysis found not only that there were significantly fewer expressions of humour than in many western societies, but also that 'jokes about leading politicians, Diet members, the Prime Minister, or government bureaucrats are rare...(and) jokes about the Emperor are unthinkable'.²⁹

The cases of Australia, the UK and Japan perhaps tell us as much about the country's culture as about their political good health. The flourishing underground of subversive anti-government humour in Zimbabwe, for example, where jokes about Mugabe are a crime, tell us something else as well. Ben McIntyre reports in *The Times* of 27 June 2008³⁰ that 'unreported amid the horrors is the growth of an underground anti-government humour'. And Zimbabwe joins the ranks of so many countries as broad ranging as Russia, China, Burma, Korea, Indonesia, Iran, Algeria, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Egypt, and in some of those in Latin America, where to John A Lent in a wide ranging paper reports '...many examples of cartoonists opposing and bringing about radical change to unfair, unequal, and oppressive regimes, and working to establish friendship and peace where hatred and conflict previously dwelled.'³¹

Le Monde cartoonist Plantu is a case in point. He launched a 'Cartooning for Peace' movement with a conference of leading political cartoonists at the UN headquarters in New York in October 2006, now sponsored by a range of international organisations including UNESCO and the Friends of Europe, and by the French Ministry of Culture and *Le Monde* itself. This has held exhibitions of cartoonists from around the world, in a range of centres and also in Ramallah, Bethlehem, East Jerusalem and Holon in June 2008 to consider how cartooning can contribute to peaceful dialogue in the Middle East.

In a different context, the Australian Cartoon Association has followed suit. In August 2007, it sponsored a joint Australian-Indonesian cartoon exhibition showcasing the sometimes tortuous relations between Australia and Indonesia.³² And what better illustration of political change could there be than this cartoon exhibition? In a culture which in any case abhors directness, after 32 years in which cartoonists survived by conveying their messages of political and social critique with even more subtlety and covertly by the use of traditional tales and allegory,

²⁹ Landsheer and Feldman One conclusion offered is that Japan is not a true democracy; another that political reality in Japan is such a farce in terms of open scandals, corruption and so forth, that there is no need for humour!

³⁰ Ben Macintyre, 'A Zimbabwean joke is no laughing matter', *The Times*, 27 June 2008, p. 31.

³¹ John A Lent....

³² See 'Cartoonists in Indonesia', *Inkspot*, No. 52, Autumn 2007.

there was a great flowering of political — and political cartoon — activity in post Soeharto Indonesia — and this was one result.

Art?: ‘Getting Angry Six Times a Week’³³

It is surely a true talent to get angry — effectively and pictorially — six times a week. But is this art? Interestingly, in his chapter ‘Hung, Drawn and Quartered...’ Guy Hansen says no, and this in spite of the fact that his institution celebrates the year’s best in an annual exhibition, and that he acknowledges the enormous significance and power of cartoons. Hansen argues, rather, that political cartoons are a form of popular culture and not high art. This he says is because they are produced in a hurry, they are the product of a strict production line, and because their subject is not chosen by the cartoonist’s free will. But what would he say about the extraordinary exhibition hung in his own institution in September 2008 of the monumental works of Emily Kngwarreye, an extraordinary Aboriginal artist, who created some of her vast masterpieces in one or two days? And can and should the fact that technology now plays such a large role in cartoon creation and reproduction count them out as art when speedy creation and reproduction for today’s daily press is of the essence of the cartoon? And does he just ignore, or does he challenge, the fact of the freedom generally enjoyed by editorial cartoonists which leaves them in very large measure in charge of their own subject matter, in our kind of society at least?

What is art in any case — and does it matter? Something appealing to the senses or emotions, a means of alternative expression, a way of conveying meaning and message through the poetry of great literature or through image or sound or movement for example? If artists have a sixth sense, another additional means of expression,³⁴ then where else does the often quite breathtaking brilliance of capturing a whole political story — or implication — in a quickly produced cartoon image sit in this scheme of things?

In their acknowledgements, editors Phiddian and Manning state that the focus of their collection is more cultural and political commentary than consideration of cartoons as ‘black and white art’. Is this traditional description one reason to see cartoons as art second class, even when so many of them are artists-proper in their own right in any case?³⁵ The description ‘Black and White Art’ reflects a history in which political cartoons more often fell into the illustrative than the editorial category and one in which, as Joan Kerr stresses, it was therefore important to evaluate ‘... the cartoon as image rather than caption in view of the lack of control

³³ A Portfolio of 14 major cartoonists’, by Professor Alan F Westin (ed.), Beacon Press, Boston 1979 ISBN-13 9780807043783.

³⁴ It is to this capacity that some attribute the higher than usual proportion of suicides among artists. Joan Kerr, op. cit. p. 22, notes that this is also the case for cartoonists.

³⁵ Oliphant etc here...

cartoonists have had over their jokes until quite recently'.³⁶ That is, as art more than humour.

For cartoons, though, visual appeal may be the least of it. There is a surprising lack of comment in the contributions to this volume about cartoonists' very different styles which may appeal in different measure. Only Phiddian in his chapter dedicated to Petty, and Thomas in his on both Petty and Cook, make a point of it. For Phiddian, of Petty, 'nothing I have seen of his work since 1960 has been easy to look at, or entertaining in a simple sense (p. 190)...To the extent that it is occasionally beautiful, it is a difficult beauty, in which critical intelligence is never sacrificed to whimsy'. For Thomas Petty's diagrams are 'a sort of no-flow chart...unique warnings or morality tales, showing us just where we have gone wrong and how deeply lost in the maze we have allowed ourselves to become' (p. 237).

Does style affect impact? Does the chaos of Petty's excruciating squiggles deter the viewer from working through to his meaning? Does the sparse, spare, naive style of a Horacek, a Katauskas or a Sharpe result in the viewer taking their message less seriously? What is the effect of Moir's bold metaphors pitched from the moral high ground, Nicholson's prescient serial election campaign themes, or of Pryor's muscular, grand, dramatic, realistic portraiture? Do any of these have different appeal, or impact? We do not know and are not told. The answers to these questions, in one sense, probably don't matter for, in the context of analysis from a political communication point of view, it is the message more than the medium on which the editorial cartoon will sink or swim, more than the drafting skills of their creators.

Paradoxically perhaps in the circumstances, Hansen lauds the parading of cartoons as art, that is, framed for exhibition, and put on a wall for quiet reflection when this surely makes them more like art than anything else. There will be different views on this but I, for one, am with Steve Bell³⁷ when he says that their impact comes from their appearance in a sea of associated text. Too often otherwise, cut off from the lifeblood which gives them birth, the nuance of the context is lost, or too much script needs to be attached in explanation for it to grab the attention of the viewer as it does with the cornflakes and coffee and the day's unfolding news.

³⁶ Her introduction, p. 5 and p. 42 — interference with captions was common until quite recently.

³⁷ Steve Bell, 'Steve Bell in America', *Cartoon History*...

Conclusion?: ‘the most concentrated and cogent form of comment and just about the most skilled and the most memorable...’, Margaret Thatcher³⁸

Even Maggie Thatcher is convinced! Political cartoons can be a synopsis of the times, a mirror and indicator of the kind of society which they purport to portray and they can play the role of the canary in the mine. Editorial cartoons can also be a moral conscience, a democratic political indicator, a cultural insight or a means to subvert an unpopular regime. They can also be an outlet to frustration or simply whimsy to lighten it all up.

The editorial cartoon is the subject of great popular interest as witness its continued occupation of prime press real estate right there next to the editorial of the day. It enjoys an almost iconic place in the history and affections of modern western democracies as the extensive literature (at least elsewhere), increasing exhibition activity and great collections committed to its preservation attest. *Comic Commentators* is an admirable contribution to the cartoon story in Australia and will contribute to the political cartoon being taken more seriously as a potential tool for political analysis and, indeed for political communication.

Comic Commentators is well presented with very few typographical errors.³⁹ It is a real pity, though, that the volume has no index, particularly for reference to different cartoonists and, with its somewhat limited and insular bibliography, it misses an opportunity to open up to the reader the broader world of scholarship about the political cartoon. ▲

³⁸ Quoted in Timothy S Benson’s Introduction to his ‘The Cartoon Century: Modern Britain through the eyes of its cartoonists’, Random House Books 2007, p. 9.

³⁹ (e.g. p. 49, p. 115, 122, 139, 241, 250).