

# BEHIND THE LINES

Election Dolls, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 2004  
John Shakespeare

One of the strongest collecting areas at the National Museum of Australia is the political cartooning collection.

The Museum has built this collection through its annual cartooning competition. Now in its eighth year, this competition has generated a series of wonderful exhibitions and provided a lasting record of Australian politics over the last decade. This year's exhibition *Behind the Lines: The Year's Best Cartoons* brings together a selection of the best works entered in the 2004 competition. Thanks to the generosity of Australia's cartoonists, we have received 279 entries from 63 artists. More than half of these works have been donated to the Museum and are helping to build a wonderful visual archive of Australian history.

*Behind the Lines* provides a great opportunity to reflect on what has been another fascinating year in Australian politics. Each cartoon is a snapshot of the changing landscape, reminding us what has happened in federal politics in recent times.

And what have our cartoonists told us about the last year? First and foremost cartoonists have consistently commented on the conduct of the war in Iraq. What has happened to the weapons of mass destruction? Are coalition forces involved in torturing prisoners? Has the shift from invasion to occupation compromised the goal of liberating Iraq? One of the best examples in the exhibition is Ron Tandberg's *The search for weapons of mass destruction goes on* in which the only weapons visible are those of the occupying power. Alan Moir also effectively captures the paradox of war with his depiction of President Bush as a tank driver proclaiming through a megaphone that 'Violence doesn't pay!'

Cartoonists have also provided some of the more accessible commentary on the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement. This agreement, whose complexity defeats not only our political commentators but many of our politicians as well, received a sceptical response from cartoonists. Again cartoonists ask us to look beyond the surface. What is the benefit for Australia? How equal can such a partnership be? This is reflected beautifully in Dyson's illustration of Uncle Sam relaxing after having consumed a good portion of roast kangaroo.

Ironically one of the more difficult issues for cartoonists over the last twelve months was the federal election. While the polls



represent the culmination of the democratic process, the staged nature of modern political campaigning and the endless spin of political minders provided a challenge for cartoonists. Vince O'Farrell expressed the cynicism felt by many with his depiction of a marginal electorate voter as a beggar attracting cash from both parties in his cartoon *The marginalised*.

As the year came to a close the tsunami that swept through Asia shattered the complacency of Australia's summer torpor. Cartoonists expressed the compassion felt for the victims and applauded the government's rapid response. Spooner's illustration of a game of beach cricket being interrupted by the outlines of bodies at the water's edge reminds us of our mortality, even as we relax on our summer vacation.

The finale to the exhibition is the fall of Mark Latham, a figure who fascinated political commentators as he emerged briefly as a threat to the Howard government early in the year, only to be decisively rejected at the polls. His final demise, caused by a recurring bout of pancreatitis, was captured by Mark Knight's cartoon of a battered and dishevelled Latham limping from the political scene, glancing sideways at an emergency case in which a smiling Kim Beasley awaits the call.

*Behind the Lines* celebrates Australian political cartooning and provides us with a wonderful opportunity to look back over the year in Australian politics. Many of the works in the exhibition will be preserved in the Museum's collection, providing a valuable resource for future historians to understand Australia. As we look back through these images we are reminded that, while our interest in politics may fade, we need to pay close attention to what our governments do. 🗣️

Guy Hansen, Exhibition Curator