



‘LAUGHING with Knives’*

Exploring political cartoons

The political cartoon can be a devastating weapon — a weapon that can make readers laugh out loud in agreement, or clench their teeth with frustration and anger in opposition. To create a cartoon that strikes a chord with the public requires inspiration, lateral thinking, and the ability to see humour where others only see ‘news’.

Introduction, Bringing the House Down,
<www.can.net.au/articles/1998/cartoon.htm>

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*The Chinese symbol or ‘pictogram’ for satire comprises ‘laughing’ and ‘knives’.

Activity 1

Creating a Cartoon

Look in your daily newspaper and you will find at least one cartoon about a current news item. The cartoon might be:

- a comment on an issue
- about a particular person in the news
- a reference to a particular event

or it might be a combination of these things.

- 1.1** Think of an event, issue or person in the news today, and draw your own cartoon about it. Don't worry if you cannot draw well — the main thing is just to have a go at this stage.



- 1.2** Share your cartoon with a classmate. Discuss what you were trying to achieve and how you were trying to achieve it. What were the main problems or difficulties that you experienced in your attempt?

Activity 2

Analysing Cartoons — a Starting Point

2.1 Look at this cartoon. What do you think is its 'message' or point? Who is the 'target' of the cartoon?



Bill Leak, in Claire McWilliams, *The People's Choice*, July 2000

The cartoon was drawn by Bill Leak. Look at the top left-hand corner of the cartoon. It shows two different ways he could draw the Prime Minister.

- 2.2 Describe the difference between the two images.
- 2.3 What different impressions are given by these two images?

This cartoon was created in response to the issue of 'cash for comment' — where public commentators, such as radio 'shock-jocks', were accused of accepting payments or favours from organisations to promote (or at least not to criticise) those organisations. The cartoonist responded, producing a cartoon that commented on the issue in a humorous but very 'pointed' way.

- 2.4 Now that you know the context, what do you think is the 'message' of this cartoon?
- 2.5 Who is the 'target'?
- 2.6 Do you think this is a successful cartoon? Discuss the elements that make it a success, or that fail to work for you.

Activity 3

What is a 'Political Cartoon'?

A political cartoon can be defined as a satirical* comment, usually humorous, and often a caricature**, about a political person, event, institution or idea, and reflecting the cartoonist's own values or opinions on that issue.

3.1 Underline each element of this definition, and discuss exactly what it means.

As you may have discovered by trying to draw your own cartoon, there are many elements that go together to make a successful and effective cartoon. Here are four key elements that need to be considered when you are responding to and analysing a political cartoon. When analysing and responding to a cartoon you need to examine its:

context — the circumstances in which it was created

content — the details of what it shows

target — who or what it is directed at

style — how it presents the content, through images, words and humour

which taken together determine its

message — the key point it is trying to make, or the idea it is putting forward.

In this unit, you will be asked to examine and analyse a number of political cartoons by applying the above elements to them. In this way, you will be considering how political cartoonists go about their work.

As a result, you will then be in a position to decide how effective and influential political cartoons can be. Finally, you will be invited to create your own political cartoon for a special competition.

***Satire** — where an artist exposes and denounces vice, folly, abuses etc. to scorn and ridicule.

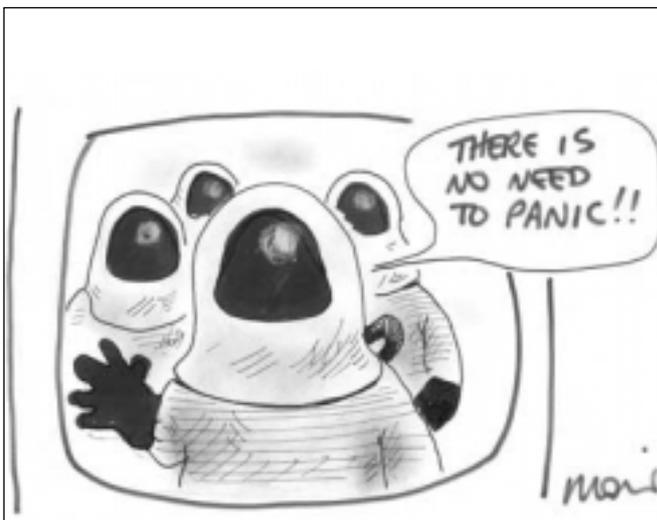
****Caricature** — a picture or description that ludicrously exaggerates the peculiarities or defects of persons or things.

Activity 4

Analysing Cartoons — Identifying the ‘Target’

One of the most important tasks when interpreting and analysing a political cartoon is to identify the cartoon’s ‘target’. A target could be a person, an idea, an institution and so on. Here are two cartoons both dealing with the same issue — the ‘war on terrorism’. This war was declared by the United States against the supporters of Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network, including the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban were believed to be key supporters of those responsible for the terrorist attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001.

4.1 Complete the summary grid for each cartoon, and then answer the questions that follow.



Alan Moir, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	



“...The beauty of it is that it’s highly contagious and costs almost nothing to produce...”

Geoff Pryor, *Canberra Times*, 16 October 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	

Both cartoons are commenting on the same issue but their ‘targets’ are very different.

- 4.2 Who is the target of the Moir cartoon?
- 4.3 Who is the target of the Pryor cartoon?
- 4.4 Why do you think cartoonists can have different ‘targets’ for the same issue?

Activity 5

Analysing Cartoons — Style: Using Caricature

Below is a photograph of the Prime Minister. Next to this image are five different cartoonists' drawings of him.

- 5.1 Identify what aspects of the Prime Minister each cartoonist caricatures — that is, which features are exaggerated and highlighted.
- 5.2 Why might they stress those features?
- 5.3 How effective you think each cartoonist is in creating a particular image of the Prime Minister?



Sturt Krygsman, *Weekend Australian*, 14 July 2001



Joanne Applegate, *Misso Magazine*, 2001



"Well, We're buggered now.
Might as well call it a day!"

Peter Lewis, *Newcastle Herald*,
18 October 2001



Steven Moore, *Weekend Australian Review*,
24 March 2001



John Spooner, *The Age*, 12 October 2001

- 5.4 Is caricature good-natured or cruel?
- 5.5 How do you think the person being caricatured might feel about it?
- 5.6 Why do you think cartoonists use caricature in their drawings?

Activity 6

Analysing Cartoons — Style: Using Irony

One of the key tools or ‘weapons’ used by cartoonists is ‘irony’ — where the literal meaning of what is presented is the opposite of what is intended.

Here are three cartoons all dealing with the same broad theme, Indigenous Australians, and all involving irony.

6.1 Complete a summary grid for each, and then answer the questions that follow.

I tell ya wot, mate, you let a few of the buggers in and soon they'll overrun the bloody place!

Tell me about it!

John Butcher, *Green Left Weekly*, 19 September 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	

SECRET MENS BUSINESS ..

Alan Moir, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 June 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	

Activity 6

Analysing Cartoons — Style: Using Irony (continued)



Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	

- 6.2 Identify the use of irony in each of the cartoons.
- 6.3 Why do you think each cartoonist chooses to use irony?
- 6.4 Do you think irony is an effective tool or 'weapon' for cartoonists to use? Explain your reasons.

Activity 7

Analysing Cartoons — Message: Presenting Ideas

Here are two cartoons that are attempting to convey the same message. Each does this in a very different way. Both cartoons are about the refusal of the Australian Government to allow what it considered to be ‘illegal’ asylum seekers to enter Australia.

7.1 Complete a summary grid for each, and answer the questions that follow.

WHY WE CAN'T TAKE ANY MORE BOAT PEOPLE...

THERE'S NO ROOM!

POKIES

INHCINCY DITCHBURN

John Ditchburn, *Ballarat Courier*, 10 September 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	

CLUB AUSTRALIA

NOPE, NOPE... FULL UP, I'M AFRAID...

"Nope, nope...full up I'm afraid..."

Bill Leak, *The Australian*, September 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	

7.2 What idea or approach is common to each cartoon?

7.3 Do you think one cartoon has realised or presented the idea more effectively than the other? Explain your reasons.

Activity 8

Analysing Cartoons — Message: Images and Words

Cartoons present points of view. This can be seen in the image or images presented in the cartoon, or the intellectual argument of the cartoon, or a combination of the two.

These three cartoons present an argument or point of view in relation to the issue of Australia seeking to limit or restrict people arriving by boat from Indonesia into Australia during 2001 and claiming asylum here as refugees.

8.1 Complete a summary grid for each and then answer the questions that follow.



That's right, Mr + Mrs Merv Bloggs, there are 80,000 immigrants due here this year and they're all planning to move into YOUR STREET...

Wilcox

Cathy Wilcox, *The Age*, 19 January 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	



AUSTRALIA - HOME OF THE GOODWILL GAMES

PUSH OFF!

"AUSTRALIA — HOME OF THE GOODWILL GAMES"

Mark Knight, *Herald Sun*, 29 August 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	

Activity 8

Analysing Cartoons — Message: Images and Words (continued)



"I know it's extremely unaustralian of me, but I'd like to welcome you to our shores..."

Fiona Katauskas, *The Chaser*, 17 September 2001

Context	
Content	
Target	
Style	
Message	

- 8.2 Describe in words what idea or argument each cartoon is presenting to the reader.
- 8.3 Discuss which cartoons rely more on the image to carry the message, and which rely more on the intellectual argument being expressed to carry that message.
- 8.4 Do you find the argument conveyed by each cartoon equally convincing? Explain your reasons.
- 8.5 Look again at all the cartoons presented in this unit. Decide which is your favourite and least favourite one. Explain what it is that appeals or does not appeal to you in each case.

Activity 9

Analysing Cartoons — Message: Are There Any Limits?

Critics of cartoonists sometimes argue that their work is often defamatory (injuring someone's good name or reputation), but because they have used the medium of the cartoon rather than words only, they are not able to be sued for defamation.

Should there be limits to what cartoonists can present? Should cartoons be subject to censorship, and if so, on what grounds?

9.1 Imagine that you are the editor of a newspaper and the following cartoons are submitted to you for inclusion in tomorrow's edition of the paper. Do you run them? In each case consider:

- the point being made in the cartoon
- who might be affected by that cartoon, and how
- if you would publish or censor it.

(You can find out what was actually decided in each case on page 16.)

A A cartoon shows a distressed Jewish person carrying all his possessions in a bundle on a stick outside Auschwitz concentration camp in 1942, about to enter the gate marked 'Work brings freedom'. The next panel shows the same distressed Jewish person carrying a rifle outside Israel in 2002, about to enter a gate marked 'War brings peace'.

B A cartoon shows an alien space creature at an Australian immigration counter being asked a series of standard questions: name, place of origin, how did you travel here etc. For each, the space creature gives an appropriately 'sci-fi' answer. When asked 'Reason for entry?' the creature replies 'Colonisation and subjugation of your species.' The official is unmoved, and asks the next question: 'Are you a Muslim?', to which the reply is: 'No.' The official waves the creature through, saying 'Have a nice day.'

C A cartoon shows a wounded and bleeding giant United States character on its hands and knees and in distress after September 11 2001, watched by a surrounding throng of people.

D A cartoon after the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania in 1996 shows a 'redneck' and his son crouching under a table at the café while the killer lets loose with his gun. The man says admiringly, 'Now that's what I call gun control'.

E Near a news item quoting the Prime Minister saying that supervised heroin injection rooms sent the wrong messages about drugs, a cartoon shows the Prime Minister pulling a blanket over a dead young drug addict saying, 'Good boy. You are sending out all the RIGHT messages'.

F As an alternative to the above, the cartoon shows the Prime Minister looking into a window of a supervised heroin injecting room and saying 'This is a disgrace!!', while behind him are three dead drug addicts sprawled in an alley.

G A cartoon shows ordinary American people marching along carrying American flags. It is headed: 'The rise of fundamentalism in the West'.

H A cartoon shows Australian troops aboard a warship heading for Afghanistan leaving the dock. A woman waving them off asks: 'What exactly are they going to fight for?' Her companion says, 'We'll have to wait till the movie comes out'.

Activity 10

Analysing Cartoons — Message: Do Cartoons Help or Harm Democracy?

Cartoons may appear simple and almost childish at times, but each one is trying to influence your ideas, and therefore your behaviour.

Each one also may have a major role to play in influencing the way we think about, and respond to, our democratic system of government.

10.1 Look at the following comments and decide how cartoons might play a positive role in a democracy. Underline or note down the key idea in each quote.

A *[A cartoon] provokes people into thinking again about an issue ... I am ... interested in affecting the people in the middle, the swinging voter if you like.*

Cartoonist Bruce Petty, *Good Weekend Magazine*
13 July 2002 pp. 16, 19

C *Drawing a cartoon is a way of expressing my anger and hopefully at the same time making other people angry about it.*

Cartoonist Phil Somerville, *Good Weekend Magazine*
13 July 2002 p. 17

B *A cartoon is 'looking under and behind the surface of events, reading between the lines, unravelling the spin doctors' spinning'.*

Cartoonist Cathy Wilcox, *Good Weekend Magazine*
13 July 2002 p. 17

D *I don't think it really matters if you're a left-wing cartoonist or a right-wing cartoonist, as long as you make your point clearly and in a hard-hitting way, you've got the potential there to make people think.*

Cartoonist Bill Leak,
<[pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/11157/20010606/
reportage.uts.edu.au/stories/aug00/23choice.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/11157/20010606/reportage.uts.edu.au/stories/aug00/23choice.html)>

Some critics, however, argue that cartoons can in fact be a destructive rather than a positive force in a democracy, 'white-anting' that democracy.

10.2 Look at this comment, and discuss the idea that cartoons might actually *harm* democracy.

The ... nature of the cartooning medium ensures that there is a lack of balance in the graphic comment on politics. Cartoons that praise politics, politicians or the political institutions do not appear because they would not be humorous ... The problem is that, if cartoons have any impact on public opinion ... it is in the direction of increasing cynicism about politics, politicians and the political system ... It is healthy in a democracy to make fun of people in power who take themselves too seriously or who try to cover over their inconsistencies with bluster or propaganda. The best political satire ... can cut to the core of political debate and highlight the real choices available in a working democracy. However, there probably also needs to be some consideration of the boundary lines between healthy satire and a more destructive cynicism.

Michael Hogan, 'Cartoonists and Political Cynicism', *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*,
Vol. 2 No. 1 July 2001, pp. 47–48.

10.3 To test this last comment, go back and look at each of the cartoons in this unit. Decide what image of the democratic system it presents. You should consider such aspects as:

- how politicians are presented
- their honesty
- their motivation
- their leadership qualities.

10.4 Taken together, do you think that they support the argument that cartoons erode and create a lack of confidence in the Australian political system? Explain your reasons.

Activity 11

Analysing Cartoons — Testing the Hypothesis

Do cartoons help or harm democracy?

In question 10.3 you considered whether cartoons help or harm a democracy and formulated a point of view or hypothesis. Below are two other exercises you can carry out to test this hypothesis further.

11.1 Collect as many political cartoons as you can in a week. If possible, collect them from several different newspapers and magazines. Do they support the argument for 'healthy satire', or for 'destructive cynicism'?

11.2 Devise a questionnaire that surveys people's response to cartoons, and the influence cartoons have on them.

Your survey needs to consider such elements as:

- How often people see political cartoons?
- Do the cartoons influence them?
- Are people more or less influenced by other political opinions, such as those of articles or commentators?

When you have agreed on the questions for the class survey, test as many people as you can. Then combine your results and analyse them. You may need to include discriminators in your survey such as:

- age
- gender
- types of newspapers read
- amount of political news or comments seen

to help you analyse the results more fully.

Activity 12

Debating the Power and Influence of the Political Cartoon

Use this and other evidence to prepare a debate on the power and influence of the political cartoon in a democracy. Some issues to consider might include:

- Who 'reads' cartoons?
- Do cartoons influence people more than the articles in a newspaper (which are usually more balanced)?
- What if different cartoons present different ideas on the same day?

Activity 13

Creating Your Own Political Cartoon

Look at the details on the National Museum of Australia's website <www.nma.gov.au/education/index.htm> about the political cartooning competition. Draw your own political cartoon and enter the competition.

You can find information on cartooning at

<www.horacek.com.au/home.htm>

<www.scratch.com.au/>

<cagle.slate.msn.com/politicalcartoons/>

Answers from the activity on page 12.

Cartoon A was rejected as 'inappropriate'.

Cartoon B was rejected by a first editor but accepted by another. The cartoonist believes it was initially rejected because it would have made the newspaper seem pro-Muslim, and therefore would have upset its readers' attitudes.

Cartoon C was published but attracted much criticism from people who believed the cartoon was belittling those who had died in the terrorist attack.

Cartoon D was rejected on the grounds that it could offend.

Cartoon E was rejected for fear that the Prime Minister could possibly consider that it implicated him in the death of a heroin user and thereby libelled him.

Cartoon F was drawn as an alternative to Cartoon E and was published.

Cartoon G was rejected as being 'unnecessarily anti-American'.

Cartoon H was published and criticised by some who said that it showed a lack of respect for the young men going off to fight.

Examples drawn from Patti Miller, 'Laughing with knives', *Good Weekend Magazine*, 13 July 2002.

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