If the primary role of the news media is to provide a check on power, cartooning is often its most potent weapon. Free from the normal rules of reportage, cartoonists don’t have to provide evidence, be reasonable, or even offer balanced and constructive opinion. They can be as infantile, subversive, absurd, or ridiculous as they wish … [O]ur cartoonists, in the main, exhibit a strong sense of injustice and seem to follow a few simple rules: cut to the truth; avoid worthiness and self-importance; don’t attack the weak; and always hold the powerful to account …. But the first rule, of course, is to be funny — if we don’t laugh it hasn’t worked.


A civics and citizenship unit investigating the Behind the Lines 2006 cartoon collection at the National Museum of Australia

Every day in newspapers around Australia people look at the editorial cartoon.
The editorial cartoon is always related to some aspect of current events and usually has a political focus.

Here’s an example of a political cartoon, drawn late in 2006 when the Australian Labor Party was about to elect a leader. Look at it and consider what it tells you about the nature or characteristics of an editorial or political cartoon. For example you might say something about the tone of a cartoon, or its message, or its style, or its attitudes and values. You can list the characteristics in the table on the next page. One example has been done to help you.

This cartoon is using people’s awareness of an aspect of popular culture (Harry Potter) to make a political point about the different Labor Party candidates for leadership.

In this unit you will be able to add to your list, and identify the key characteristics that make political cartoons popular and effective.

You will also be able to design a way of testing whether cartoons are effective in promoting, or possibly even undermining, our democratic political system.

Finally, you will be able to decide which of the cartoons in this unit was voted as the most popular cartoon by the people who visited the Behind the Lines 2006 exhibition at the National Museum of Australia.
A cartoon can use people's awareness of an aspect of popular culture (Harry Potter) to help people understand and identify with a political point. 1,
How different cartoonists depict the same issue

Cartoons are usually very amusing and entertaining. But sometimes they deal with serious issues.

Look at the five cartoons below and on the next page. They were all drawn in response to a major event of late December 2005 at Sydney’s Cronulla beach. Answer these questions about them.

1 If you had no other information about this event other than that provided in these cartoons, what would you say the main issue was?

2 What is the attitude of each cartoonist to the issue? How can you tell?

3 Several of the cartoons use symbols to make their point. Discuss the use of symbols in these cartoons — for example the design of the shorts on the sunbaker and the use of the Australian flag in two of the cartoons.

4 Look at how the characters are drawn. Discuss the way the different types of people are drawn and why the cartoonist would do this.

5 Look at the collection of weapons in cartoon 2. What is this cartoon literally saying? What is it symbolically saying? What does this suggest about a major difference between a journalist and a cartoonist?

6 Here is the way the curator of the Behind the Lines 2006 cartoon exhibition at the National Museum of Australia summarised the context in which these cartoons were drawn:

On 11 December 2005, a crowd of over 5000 people gathered at Cronulla beach to ‘reclaim the beach’. Violence erupted as elements of the crowd attacked several people of Middle Eastern appearance. Urged on by SMS text messages, the violence was apparently incited by an earlier attack on surf lifesavers, but also revealed deep racial tensions in Sydney’s south-western suburbs.

How well do the cartoonists tell this story? Are there any points of view missing from the five cartoons?

7 Assuming this is a representative collection of the nature of cartoons drawn at the time, how could a historian writing in the future about these events use them?

8 Do you think the cartoons are effective? Explain and support your answer.

9 Which of the five cartoons, all on the same issue, do you think is most effective? Why?

10 Add any characteristics to the list you are developing on page 16.
For more information on this issue see STUDIES 1/2007, Between the Flags, p. 33
You will have noticed that the cartoonists all had a different approach towards the Cronulla situation, though they all had a similar attitude towards it.

Cartoonists, however, do not always have a similar attitude towards an issue. Sometimes they use an issue to pursue their own agendas or political ideas.

Here is an example of an issue where there are contrasting responses by two cartoonists.

During 2006 the Australian Government pursued a policy of making Australian history compulsory in schools.

Look at the cartoons and answer the questions that follow.

Cartoon 7 draws on a famous portrait of the explorer, Captain James Cook. In it, Prime Minister Howard is presented as James Cook.

We must teach Australian History as a stand alone subject...
11 Why would the cartoonist make this allusion?
12 What is the cartoonist’s own opinion? How can you tell?
13 What is this cartoon saying to readers?
14 Why are Aboriginal people included in cartoon 8?
15 What is the cartoonist’s opinion? How can you tell?
16 What is this cartoon saying to readers?
17 Add any comments about the nature of cartoons to your list on page 16.
How cartoonists use caricature

One of the key characteristics of a political cartoon is its style, and particularly its use of caricature.

Caricature involves exaggerating and distorting the features of a person to achieve a response in the viewer.

Look at the following gallery of caricatures. In each case:

18 Identify the person/s involved (there is a list on page xx if you need help).

19 Find a realistic photograph of that person and comment on what the cartoonist is doing to achieve his or her caricature.

20 Where there are two or more representations of the same person, compare the different style and approach of each.

21 How do you respond to these?

22 How do you think the subjects might respond? Why?

23 What impact do you think they have?

24 Are some better or more successful than others?

25 By its nature, caricature usually involves a belittling of people. Is this acceptable?

26 Add to the list of characteristics you are developing on page 16.
CARTOON 11
Rocco Fazzari, Beazley removes Lathan's legacy, Sydney Morning Herald, 2006

CARTOON 12
Ron Tandberg, Flirting with racism, The Age, 15 August 2006

CARTOON 13
John Tiedemann, A comfortable Coonan, The Australian, 15 July 2006

CARTOON 14
David Pope, Dorothyvector, Sun-Herald, 19 February 2006

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CARTOON 15
Sean Leahy, Historic photo, Courier-Mail, 15 August 2006

CARTOON 16
Mark Knight, Nothing shall pass, Herald Sun, 21 June 2006

CARTOON 17
Jonathan Bentley, Johnny’s garage sale, Courier-Mail, 8 September 2006

CARTOON 18
Bill Leak, The truth will out, The Australian, 29 April 2006

CARTOON 19
Tom Jellett, Pillar of the community, The Australian, 14 November 2005

CARTOON 20
Rocco Pazzino, Malcolm Turnbull glances into the future, The Age, 2006
Political cartoons can also have a quite different tone to them. The tone can vary from very light-heated (showing the way the world is but accepting that this is just the way things are) to bitter and savage (showing the way the world is but condemning that picture as evil and morally unacceptable).

27 Here are four cartoons. Decide what you think their tone is — ranging from 1 (gentle and accepting) to 5 (savagely condemnatory).

28 Add any comments to your list of the characteristics of cartoons on page 16.
How cartoonists can disturb or shock

The best cartoons have the ability to present an idea or issue in a very clear and striking way – one that gives you a real jolt.

Here are five cartoons from the National Museum of Australia’s Behind the Lines 2006 exhibition. They are associated with issues and contexts that you may or may not recognise.

You will still see them as powerful, ‘jolting’ images.

29 Write your response under each (you can see the actual contexts on page 30).
30 Add to the list of characteristics you are developing on page 16.

CARTOON 25

Cartoonists sometimes comment on aspects of our democratic institutions in their cartoons — such as parliament, the courts, voting, the nature of democracy, and so on.

Look at these two cartoons where the subject is the nature of Australian democracy as seen by two cartoonists.

31 What is each saying about democracy?
32 Why would the cartoonist say this?
33 What impact might this have on people’s attitudes to, and perceptions of, democracy?
34 Is it acceptable to do this?

35 Add any comments to your list on page 16.
The two previous cartoons are a direct comment on Australian democracy. Many people believe cartoons help keep our democracy healthy — by providing a way of making people think about what is happening in politics. Others argue that perhaps cartoons harm our democracy by distorting our ideas of the democratic process, and even undermine our respect for it.

Here are two comments on the impact of political cartoons on democracy:

**A**

One by one they make you laugh or wince appropriately at the foibles or hypocrisies of politicians, but taken as a whole the commentary is very, very negative. They give such an unrelievedly bleak picture of politicians and the whole political process.

I started to think about the impact of cartoons on the popular perception of Australian politics, and I was a little disturbed by what I was thinking.

The problem is not with individual cartoons. No, the problem comes from a steady diet, week after week, and year after year, of images of politicians as liars, cheats, compromisers and fools.

Whereas other mass media journalists are expected to report fairly objectively and without bias, there is no such expectation for cartoonists.

When I speak of bias here I don’t mean a preference for the Liberal Party or the Labor Party. Most cartoonists make no distinction here. No, what I mean by bias here is that virtually all the images of politicians and politics are negative.

It is almost impossible to find a cartoon that says something positive about politics. In general, I believe that the lampooning of politicians does much more good than harm.

There is a great democratic value in satire. Yet, I do think that the social pressures all added together are dangerously negative about the profession of politics. Where are the balancing positive images? They are not going to come from cartoonists, because images of honourable politicians are not funny, and unfunny drawings will not be published.

— Michael Hogan, Perspective, ABC, 4 July 2003


**B**

In our view, cartoonists pose no significant threat to public confidence in the institutions of liberal democracy.

Our research indicates that cartoons may contribute to public opinion among those who read the editorial pages, but they are not a large direct influence.

Cartoons mainly reinforce strongly held views rather than sway opinion immediately; they may also influence the climate of opinion among newspaper readers over time.

Their constant effect is to maintain public scepticism about the motivations and spin of politicians, and while Hogan clearly believes that this effect too often slips over into the sponsorship of cynicism, we think this more of a benefit than a risk.

The contention that political cartoonists should be more balanced and temperate in their work both exaggerates their influence and misconstrues the purpose of their art ...

This attitude underestimates the capacity of citizens to recognise satire as the hyperbolic form of political commentary that it is.

Very little would be gained and a significant element of the free press would be lost if we sought to put conditions on cartoonists’ licence to mock.

36 What is Hogan’s main point?
37 What is Manning’s and Phiddian’s main point?
38 Look back at the cartoons. Decide which have anything to do with politics or aspects of democracy.
39 Decide what the attitude of the cartoonist is for each of these.
40 If you only had these cartoons as a source of ideas about Australian democracy and politics, what would your attitude be?
41 Where else do you get your ideas and attitudes from?
42 Whose point of view, Hogan’s or Manning’s and Phiddian’s do you favour?
43 Add any comments to your list on page 16.

Both sides in this debate acknowledge that they do not really know whether cartoons have an influence or not — nobody has ever tried to study this issue.

Here is your chance to try to find out.

Prepare a survey on whether people are influenced by political cartoons

When you have agreed on the questions for the class survey, test as many people as you can. Then pool your results and analyse them. To help you analyse the results more fully, you may need to include discriminators in your survey, such as:
- age
- gender
- types of newspapers read
- amount of political news or comments seen.

Here are some possible questions. You may want to add/delete/change after class discussion to decide just what it is you are trying to discover, and what information is needed to discover these things.

- How often do you look at political cartoons in a newspaper? Everyday/sometimes/rarely/never
- Which newspaper and cartoonist? Name:
- Why do you look at them? Amusement/information/other
- Do they influence your opinion? Always/sometimes/never
- Do you always agree with them? Always/sometimes/never
- Do they change your opinion? Always/sometimes/never
- Do you get information and ideas from them? Always/sometimes/never
- What image of politics and democracy do you think they promote? Generally positive/ generally negative/sometimes positive and sometimes negative
- How would you rate political cartoons (1–5 where 1 is very low and 5 is very high) for:
  - knowledge
  - fairness
  - accuracy
  - humour
  - ideas?
- Any other comment?

Other possible research tasks

Cartoons and elections

Do cartoonists try to influence people to support one side or the other? Here is a variety of ways of trying to answer that question.

1 Analyse one cartoonist, and comment on his/her approach to the federal election.
2 Analyse one newspaper’s news and editorial attitude towards the election, and compare these with the attitude and emphases of the cartoonist.
3 Gather as many cartoons as possible about the election from a variety of sources. Compare the cartoonists’ ideas, approaches and emphases.
Here is what we think the cartoon on the first page of this unit tells us about editorial or political cartoons.

A nalysing a cartoon

It is humorous. We are meant to laugh.
It has a serious message or meaning behind it.
It taps into popular culture and knowledge—in this case everybody recognises the Harry Potter theme behind the cartoon.
It deals with a current political event.
It is humorous. We are meant to laugh.
It has a serious message or meaning behind it.
It taps into popular culture and knowledge—in this case everybody recognises the Harry Potter theme behind the cartoon.
It deals with a current political event.

From earlier pages

The context in which these cartoons appeared are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cartoon</th>
<th>Context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Treasurer Peter Costello and Prime Minister John Howard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Queensland Senator Barnaby Joyce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Former Opposition Leaders Kim Beasley and Mark Latham</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Communications Minister Senator Helen Coonan</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Former Veterans’ Affairs Minister Danna Vale and Health Minister Tony Abbott</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Former Immigration Minister Senator Amanda Vanstone, Prime Minister John Howard and former Opposition Leader Kim Beasley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>United States President George Bush and Prime Minister John Howard</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Former Immigration Minister Senator Amanda Vanstone</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Prime Minister John Howard</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Minister for Defence Brendan Nelson</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Prime Minister John Howard</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Minister for the Environment Malcolm Turnbull</td>
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A final word about cartoons

Sometimes cartoonists just want to have fun! See the back cover of this magazine.

The cartoon on display in the National Museum of Australia exhibition that was voted the most popular one by visitors was: ‘Bananas’, the cartoon on the front cover of this edition of STUDIES.

Resources on analysing political cartoons

Hired Assassins, Political Cartooning in Australia. Film Australia, 2003: <www.filmaustralia.com.au>
You can see an interactive interview with cartoonist Geoff Pryor at: <www.nma.gov.au/education/school_resources/websites_and_interactives/political_cartoons_interactive_activities/>

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<tr>
<th>Cartoon</th>
<th>Context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Australians arrested for drug smuggling in Indonesia</td>
</tr>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Female Muslim suicide bombers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>David Hicks, an Australian accused of terrorism, kept in the American prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Japanese scientific whaling</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>The loss of the body of Private Kovko, killed in Iraq</td>
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