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HERITAGE AND PRACTICE

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EDITED BY JESSICA MILNER DAVIS



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Jessica Milner Davis  
Editor

# Satire and Politics

The Interplay of Heritage and Practice

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*Editor*

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Cover credit: “Deuced funny!”, 1897, by Phillip (Phil) William May.

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*This book is dedicated to  
Rachel Alexandra Davis  
who taught me all I know about editing*

**Note on “Deuced funny!”**

The cover image for this book, “Deuced funny!”, is taken from *Phil May’s Sketch Book* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1897). It depicts Melton Prior, UK war correspondent, and A.C. Corbould, a *Punch* artist, sharing some amusing political gossip. It was drawn by self-taught English cartoonist Phillip William May (1864–1903), who went to Australia in 1885 to work on the influential magazine, *The Bulletin*, and continued to contribute to its pages after he returned to Europe in 1888. His accomplished style earned him recognition as one of the great cartoonists of the nineteenth century. May’s work is discussed in Chapter 1, by Jessica Milner Davis and Lindsay Foyle.

# FOREWORD

Rodney Marks

There are some politicians and political events that outdo satire itself. US satirical songster Tom Lehrer commented that awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Henry Kissinger in 1973 made satire obsolete<sup>1</sup> and the remark by British satirist Peter Cook that “the heyday of satire was Weimar Germany, and look how it stopped Hitler!”<sup>2</sup> kills all laughter. The USA’s forty-fifth president, Donald Trump (elected November 2016), and the President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte (elected June 2016), are both self-parodying leaders with anti-establishment rhetoric. Many satirists find them beyond intelligent humorous criticism, and resort to blunt insult comedy.<sup>3</sup>

Richard Nixon, US President from 1969 to 1974, made an appearance on *Laugh-In* (16 September 1968) in order to soften his image and make himself more electable: it seemed to work well. Since then, every US president and many candidates for office have used satirical TV programmes to humanise themselves, to demonstrate self-deprecation and to show voters that they are just regular folk. Barack Obama, US President 2009–2017, appeared seven times on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* up to 21 July 2015, just before Jon Stewart left his 16-year tenure as host on 6 August 2015. Stewart has been accused of being in love<sup>4</sup> with Barak Obama and more seriously of giving the President easy access to the show’s demographic and endorsing Obama’s policies on air.<sup>5</sup>

The annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner with the president of the day has been hosted by the White House Correspondents’ Association since 1924. From 1983 onwards, it has taken the form of

a “roast” or send-up of the president and also of the media, delivered by one or more comedians. Presidents have also been involved in delivering comedy directed at the media and at themselves. Whilst usually very funny, the event has been criticised by the fifth estate (bloggers and other alternative media) for its “coziness” between the fourth estate (the mainstream media) and the president. Using the best comedy writers available, the president typically hilariously lampoons the media and himself, but clearly for a political purpose: the satire makes him more likeable and promotes his policies and programmes.

In Australia, satire is often associated with television, but most especially with the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), aligning the establishment with the voice of satire. In theatre, something similar occurs with the Sydney Theatre Company’s annual satirical *Review at the End of the Wharf*.<sup>6</sup> This has been going on since 2003 and become part of the arts establishment. As with victims of political cartoonists’ jibes in newspapers and online, political and societal leaders know they are making an impact if they are the subject of the joke in such venues.

The current prevailing culture of the ABC has been shown to be left-leaning (to the Green and Labor Parties).<sup>7</sup> The Greens in Australia have never formed or contributed to a government and see themselves as the voice of dissent, to the left of Labor. The current Liberal-National Party coalition is conservative, more to the right. How is it then that employees of the Sydney Theatre Company and the ABC, with salaries and entitlements provided by government funding, are allowed to bite the hand that feeds them? How fearless, intelligent and effective can these satirists be? Studies have shown that under Soviet rule, the KGB employed joke writers to disseminate gags against the regime as a deliberate safety valve.<sup>8</sup> The same appears to be true in democratic societies like the USA and Australia. So, satirists and their audiences are not undermining government power and policies: satire in fact sustains those governments. A little rebellion with laughter prevents a more dramatic upheaval and the last laugh is on the satirists.

## REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

Satire is not only attractive for individuals as expressions of opinion and entertainment, it is also valued for organisational purposes. Is this the ultimate co-option of satire, to have commercial sponsors rather than



political allies? I do not think so. I am a comedian myself, performing as a comic hoaxer at business events within the genre of the corporate impostor. I employ satire in every performance I do. Based in Sydney, I am Australian, and have performed all over Australia but also in a dozen or so other countries. Since 1991, I have had about 2500 performances, for the private, public and the non-profit sectors alike. My satire is enjoyable, both for me and my audiences, but it is also playing with fire. I enjoy that. Its true purpose is instructive and liberating—at least from some corporate and personal straightjackets. This is what I am paid to do.

I arrive at an event—in the persona of a plausibly real character agreed in advance with whoever is hiring me in the hosting organisation—and I work the room, schmoozing with attendees. If it is a conference, I will attend a regular seminar on offer along with other delegates and ask a question; if it is a dinner, I will attend pre-dinner drinks and socialise normally. This mixing and mingling establishes the credibility of my comic character. At some agreed point, often one advertised in the formal programme of the event, I will be called to a lectern to deliver a keynote address. I tailor my remarks carefully and with months of preparation to the particular institutional culture and language. Business being what it is, that often involves appalling jargon and I pursue this and other aspects of the received wisdom to their logical ends. It is painful for the audience and sometimes risky for me—certainly risky for my hosts who are in on the secret and paying me good money for the act.

At the conclusion of the speech, the performance continues with a Q&A session. These questions are not set up or organised in advance. Those in-the-know about the hoax remain passive observers. This time gives other people in the group with the capacity to be funny and who have tumbled to the secret of the impersonation a chance to have some revenge—not really on the corporate impostor, but on those who booked him.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes it takes time before the impostor is unmasked, but the impact is correspondingly magnified when that eventuates. This is what happened for a client of mine—a brick-making company—at a corporate event they held at a large hotel in Melbourne on Saturday 26 June 1993. For this company (let us call it Goodbrik), I portrayed Mr. B. Rick Wall, Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive, Advance International Limited (we shall call it), the US company that owns little Australian Goodbrik.

At the event, I attended a seminar as a US impostor and was welcomed like this: “Rick would like to say a few words to us now about

Advance's proposed new management style: including their approach to [a] subsidiaries' performance appraisal, [b] T[otal] Q[uality] M[anagement],<sup>10</sup> [c] reporting, and [d] corporate communication. Over to you, Rick." I spoke some corporate gobbledegook for a while, just long enough to establish the character's credibility. A pre-prepared "outro" (opposite of intro) was then read by someone in a position of authority: "Thank you, Rick, for those comments. We appreciate you taking the time out from your busy schedule to join us this afternoon and look forward to your keynote after-dinner address this evening. Thanks again, Rick." Surprisingly, no-one saw the joke in the name. I was asked if I was related to the Walls of Bendigo [a local country town], and responded: "No, the Walls of Jericho". "Oh", was the reply.

My after-dinner speech was introduced this way: "It is once again my privilege to introduce Mr. B. Rick Wall, executive assistant to the new chief executive at Advance. As Advance is the ultimate 'owner' and controller of Goodbrik, we thought that it might be useful to obtain a view from above. Rick was a senior general manager at Esso prior to his being head-hunted across to Advance. He is a qualified engineer, and has a background in turn-around management, downsizing, and restructuring organisations. He informs me that after the presentation he would be pleased to take questions. Please join me in welcoming Mr. B. Rick Wall".

There were 500 people at 50 tables of ten: a full house. Things had been going badly for the company. There was a recession and hundreds of people were being laid off. Morale was low as evidenced by high levels of petty theft and absenteeism. People felt that they would be the next group to be "let go". So I drew some predictive scenarios or "word pictures" for the audience. There were, I falsely claimed, rows of staffed tables just outside the banquet room doors, with pay-out packages for everyone, listed alphabetically. I talked suitable MBA talk at great length and issued veiled threats about the need for legal action. Silence ensued. A young woman began to cry.

Next, a succession of four heroic workers stood up to defend Goodbrik. The first, from the finance department, said, "I know what you're talking about—the \$30,000 that went missing. Well, we found the guy. He needed a bridging loan following a messy divorce. We retrieved the money and sacked him. But we didn't go to the police as required by law". I said no, that wasn't the issue. The confessor looked crestfallen. A second executive stood up and said: "I know what you're alluding to. That overseas deal that ended up with a great loss. We had a

go and bribed the local officials but to no avail”. No, I said, that wasn’t it either—and did he know that bribery was a crime? A third executive took the floor and said, “Look, I know we’ve lost profitability, but in a price war it is market share that counts. When the recession lifts we’ll be sitting pretty”. No, it’s not that either, I said, and added that I was until now unaware that Goodbrik was unprofitable, and did he know that this was a career-limiting move?

I looked across at the advertising department table, the people who booked me to improve morale and hence productivity. They had their faces buried in their hands, thinking that this was all disastrous. But as the satiric performer, you have the best “feel of the room” since you are at the focal point and everyone’s attention is tightly held. I felt that I could pull it off, so I kept on ramping up the mood without letting slip my mask.

A fourth and final questioner stood up. He was the sales manager, an important figure in the chain of command. This was the target I wanted.<sup>11</sup> The sales manager started counting on his fingers: “Let me get this right. One, we’ve put our financial house in order. Two, we’ve given the international thing a go, as directed. Three, the market share battle is being won”. He went very red in the face and also on his bald head—and he got it! He swore loudly and laughed. My recollection then is of 500 people standing as one, yelling not at me but across the tables at each other: “I knew it”, “Nonsense!”, and much swearing. Pandemonium ceased when the MC read the outro I had prepared: “In case you haven’t guessed by now, we have been witness to a comic hoax. Mr. B. Rick Wall—or BRICK WALL—is corporate comedian Rodney (Hoaxes and Jokeses) Marks. Along with many of us here at Goodbrik, he believes that we should be more sceptical of outside experts, especially when we have the talent, skills and experience within our own ranks to solve our own challenges. Thank you, Rodney Marks.”

My opinion of the quality of this show was at odds with the views of the booking executives: they had suffered greatly and it took a long time for me to receive payment—a form of punishment for making their advertising department squirm on the night. But to me it was a success, albeit a risky one, and the report in at least one national magazine endorsed my judgement.<sup>12</sup> My style of satirical hoaxing is different to many comedians’ who work this same circuit, but comedians in demand have much in common.<sup>13</sup> What is essential is mentioning and satirising key individuals, organisations, management language and fads, products and services. This tailoring to the individual organisation gives each

performance a one-off appeal so that the audience members feel special, even as they are being critiqued in a very targeted way.

Subtly, a number of messages are delivered:

1. That criticism is acceptable, as long as there is evidence to support it (for this I have to prepare as realistically as an MBA student seeking top grades).
2. That results are more important than personal ego (I too have suffered failure).
3. That being human (having fun) is compatible with being an employee.

Certainly, I do enjoy my work.

## CONCLUSION

Maybe satire does have a bite, even when it is paid for or co-opted by its targets. This book is a collection of scholarly studies reflecting the serious research that has taken place here in Australasia and elsewhere into the satirical mode, its origins and impact. These scholars are my friends and colleagues and I have followed their arguments with great interest over the years. I recommend their work to you and hope to see you at a corporate event in the future.

Sydney, Australia  
November 2016

## NOTES

1. Todd S. Purdom, “When Kissinger Won the Nobel Peace Prize, Satire Died”, 30 July 2000.
2. “Political Satire: Fringe Benefits”, 24 August 2000.
3. Sarah Lyall, “When Reality Tops Parody”, 5 November 2016, p. B1. See also Chap. 9 by Robert Phiddian.
4. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Christina Littlefield opined: “Rewatching President Obama’s appearances on ‘The Daily Show With Jon Stewart’ is like watching a love story unfold, with the initial meet-cute, the excitement of the initial courtship and the snipes that come after the honeymoon period wears off and the relationship reaches a comfortable security” (“When Barak Obama Met Jon Stewart: A Love Story”, 21 July 2015).

5. Kyle Smith, “Jon Stewart’s Secret Obama Meetings Reveal He’s a Partisan Hack”, 29 July 2015.
6. The name refers to the Wharf Theatre, home of the Sydney Theatre Company, a government-funded arts entity.
7. Pia Akerman, “It’s Easy Being Green at the ABC”, 21 May 2013.
8. “Author Interview: Christie Davies (*Jokes and Targets*)”, 2011.
9. For more detail of how this works, see Rodney Marks’ personal website at: [www.comedian.com.au](http://www.comedian.com.au).
10. A notorious buzzword at the time in management circles.
11. Sometimes a comic hoaxer is booked by the boss, sometimes by middle management. Being booked by the boss can be tricky: it is important not to be seen as an instrument of authority. Being booked by middle management as in this case allows the performer to roast people up and down the chain of command.
12. Lenore Nicklin, “Stand-up Chameleon”, 13 December 1994.
13. Most see themselves as comic hoaxers, not amateur pranksters. On the distinction between hoax and prank, see Rodney Marks and Jessica Milner Davis, “Hoax and Prank”, 2014.

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## NOTES ON AUTHOR

**Rodney Marks** is an Australian comedian, hoax speaker and corporate impostor ([www.comedian.com.au](http://www.comedian.com.au)). Since 1991, he has presented faux invited keynotes at business events. Rodney holds a BA from the University of New England, Armidale, Australia, an MBA from the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM), and an MPA from Harvard University's Kennedy School. He has been artist-in-residence at the AGSM and at Harvard, and visiting professor-at-large at the University of New South Wales. He has given more than 3,000 satiric performances, mostly in Australia but also in New Zealand, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Mauritius, England and the USA. He is a founding member of the Australasian Humour Studies Network and his publications include: *The Management Contradictionary* (with Benjamin Marks and Robert Spillane, 2006, and a completely revised and updated version, *Funny Business: Management Unmasked*, 2017), and (with Jessica Milner Davis) "Hoax and Prank" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (Sage: 2014).

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Jessica Milner Davis

This book originated in papers presented in a panel offered by the Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN) at a 2015 conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL). The panel comprised many of the authors in this book: Mark Rolfe, Nicholas Holm, Rebecca Higgie and Lindsay Foyle, with Jessica Milner Davis as Chair and Rodney Marks as Discussant. We were grateful to ASAL for its broad interpretations of the term “literature” and also “Australian”, permitting us to range widely over many satirical formats and materials in New Zealand as well as Australia. The lively debate that followed our Discussant’s concluding remarks quickly made clear that the past and present connections between satire and politics could not easily be constrained to any specifically Australasian context and that additional studies were needed to complete the exploration.

Clearly the historical practices involving satire that attach to the Westminster democratic tradition demand examination in a US as well as an Anglo-Australasian context. The importance of a wider ambit was confirmed when some of the material (by Higgie and Milner Davis) was presented to an international audience at Brunel University London’s Centre for Comedy Studies Research. Indeed, the research and examples now canvassed here have a truly trans-Atlantic perspective. Thus, while the resulting book remains focused upon the Anglosphere, its international frame of reference means that its insights—well summed up in the final overview here provided by Robert Phiddian in Chap. 9—have general relevance. This wide applicability is timely when one considers that,

not just in Western democracies but around the world, political satire has never been more freely available and consumed than at present. It is a tool in the kit of every cartoonist, writer, news-reporter, advertising creative, corporate leader, campaign manager and everyone who runs for office. Even the notoriously po-faced former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, found himself cracking jokes (admittedly rather heavy-handed ones) at the dinner he gave on 15 December 2010 for members of the UN press corps.

Modern media have altered but also expanded ordinary citizens' access to satirical commentary on everyday news and events. Satire has even invaded the corporate world, as well as fuelling that of entertainment and the Internet. Satire is in fact big business. While cultural (and political) conventions may differ about what is and is not permissible as its targets and forms of expression, there is a universal and unchanging human desire to unmask hypocrisy, to criticise duplicity, corruption and failure and to ridicule the self-important. And there seem to be increasing amounts of all this crying out for satirical attention. Whether it is expressed in humorous or serious terms (for serious satire is not always funny), satire derives its justification from the freedom proclaimed by democracy. The list of cartoonists and satirists who exercise that freedom only to find it opposed by economic censorship or worse grows each week (many cases are recorded on the website, Index on Censorship 2015, at: [http://ioc.sagepub.com/site/includefiles/Comedy\\_and\\_Censorship.xhtml](http://ioc.sagepub.com/site/includefiles/Comedy_and_Censorship.xhtml), accessed 19 October 2016).

Despite such counter-pressures, satire continues to attract practitioners and audiences alike, and not merely in wealthy Western democracies. Around the world, satirical TV news-shows outstrip serious information channels in their vast and growing outreach, particularly to younger Internet-savvy generations—although the precise nature of their impact remains debatable, as is explored by a number of the present chapters. Not surprisingly, satire's economic and practical effects are increasingly the topic of scholarly enquiry around the world. Since satire is so often bound up with politics, a particularly salient issue is *cui bono?* Again, this is a theme that several chapters explore in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Those who earn their living from satire are not often asked for their opinions on these vital topics. When this does happen, however, an interesting perspective emerges that meshes very well with the scholarly studies. Hence the significance of the Foreword contributed by my esteemed AHSN colleague, Rodney Marks. His experiences show that satire *can*



bring about change, but that achieving this may well exceed the limits of what is feasible when the audience is the general public, whether via page, stage or screen. Marks's account speaks tellingly of his client's discomfort at the extremity of means pursued to achieve the brief for the business organisation Marks was hoaxing. He certainly succeeded in his commission to produce individual and organisational behavioural change; but it seems unlikely that his patrons fully understood in commissioning him just how deeply the satirist's knife must penetrate if it is to produce results. One feels the Human Resources Department was unlikely to have approved such goings-on.

In terms of style, the following chapters vary quite widely, from those in the traditions of literary and cultural history (chapters by Mark Rolfe, Conal Condren, and myself and Lindsay Foyle), through visual and media studies (chapters by Nicholas Holm, Rebecca Higgin and Lucien Leon) to reports and discussions of quantitative research (chapters by Alison O'Connor and co-authors Khin Wee Chen, Robert Phiddian and Ronald Stewart). Integrating the perspectives and conclusions offered by both the social science and the humanities chapters is a challenging task, but can be richly productive of new insights—a central purpose of undertaking a book in this form. Both established and emerging scholars have contributed to this aim, as is made clear in the final overview chapter by Robert Phiddian which supplements the introductory one (by Davis and Foyle).

Despite these rewards, curating the combination of authors and perspectives and approaches involved a number of challenges for the editor, as well as for the writers themselves. Reviews informed by large numbers of short multi-author studies have their own requirements; literary chapters have different ones. The combination proved not well served by slavish adherence to any one conventional style of referencing. Accordingly, while most chapters in this book follow a normal humanities style of citing their sources, those that of necessity list large numbers of studies (frequently multi-authored) have followed a carefully evolved "combination style" that is designed to preserve the flow of the argument but omit no essential details, while being space-saving. It is set out clearly in the first note to each of the chapters concerned. For the reader's convenience, complete lists of references are appended to each chapter; and in view of the many Internet and video sources under consideration, these are divided into print and online sources (and manuscript ones where applicable).

It remains for me to thank all who have contributed to this book: the authors; the cartoonists in Australia and the UK who have so generously given permission for their work to be reproduced; the editorial staff at Palgrave Macmillan and Springer Verlag who have supported me through the process (despite their own demanding period of corporate change); the artists and custodians who have generously afforded permission for the reproduction of vital art-works and, above all, my family, whose patience with yet another book on humour is deeply appreciated. I hate to say it, but there may be another one coming.

Sydney, Australia  
November 2016

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# The Satirist, the Larrikin and the Politician: An Australian Perspective on Satire and Politics

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The Australian tradition of political satire is one in which few holds are barred. Since colonial times, Australian politics itself has always been a fairly naked struggle for power.<sup>1</sup> Although some New Zealanders might claim their politics to be somewhat more civilised (or perhaps just better run) than that of their uncouth cousins across the Tasman Sea, by and large the two countries share a frank approach to governance and also to the vital role of satire in rendering its frustrations tolerable for the electorate. While many other nations have an equally robust satirical discourse about politics (France, for example), this chapter invites the reader to adopt a particularly Australasian perspective; reflecting partly the book's origins, and partly the richness of material for study.

The term “Australasian” is used here, not to indicate a relationship with the countries of North and South-East Asia, but to refer to

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commonalities in the politics and cultures of Australia and New Zealand. Both inherited their political and economic systems from Great Britain, accompanied by cultural influences which have been modified only a little by multicultural immigration and by the aim of better recognition of their different Indigenous peoples. As Nicholas Holm points out in Chap. 4, among the many things that the two nations have in common are a wide permit for the use of humour in daily life and a particular taste for the deadpan and levelling kind. To these can be added a preference for what is practical and down-to-earth and a fixed distrust of leaders and politicians.

In Australia, many of these traits are embodied in “the larrikin”, a male figure (almost exclusively) that has long served as a national self-image. It looms large in political cartooning, even if its power is waning somewhat today. Typically, larrikins delight in rule-breaking behaviour, often masked as humour or leg-pulling, and mostly of the forgivable kind. This chapter describes the evolution of the larrikin image in Australian cartooning history and its use in political satire. It also introduces the book as a whole by relating its different chapters to each other and to the general topic of satire and politics. It begins with a brief account of Australian humour and of the nature of satire and political cartooning, before turning to the larrikin and cartooning.

## AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR

Like other Anglophone countries, Australians like to see an ability to laugh at themselves as a national trait. Others are also good targets—especially the English and the cousins in New Zealand. But as a rule, Australians do expect to be taken down a peg or two by their own compatriots. Humour as practised in Australia effectively acts as an equalising force and the habit of “taking the mickey” (taking the piss) is nearly universal, serving a normative function across all levels of society and between various cultural groups.<sup>2</sup> It has even been termed a democratic right.<sup>3</sup> Cockney and Irish traditions have both contributed to shape this permissive culture about the use of inter-personal humour. Post-war immigrant cultures have mostly absorbed the practice, with remarkable numbers of successful self-styled ethnic (“wog”) comedians, including some Indigenous stand-ups.<sup>4</sup> This insistence on putting down the newly arrived and mocking not only incompetent or self-important leaders but also one’s own friends has been seen by one historian as sharing something with the rich tradition of satirical name-calling and mimetic mockery found in many Australian Indigenous cultures.<sup>5</sup>

Literary scholars nevertheless point out that despite its assertive irreverence, Australian humour is “usually an acknowledgement of the status quo”,<sup>6</sup> frequently displaying uncertainty and bravado rather than confidence and finesse.<sup>7</sup> As with the larrikin, rebelliousness is contained within and limited by the humour. The prevalent style delights in crudity, valuing it somewhat childishly as a form of rebellion against propriety. Collecting Australian jokes for publication, Adams and Newell decided that Australians must in fact “fear the ‘other’, what we deem to be foreign or alien, and so tell savage, uncivilised jokes about Aborigines, Jews, migrants ... Jokes that are bigoted, blasphemous or phobic outnumber all other categories”.<sup>8</sup> Davies found a unique corpus of Australian “dirt and vomit jokes”.<sup>9</sup> Almost anything goes, it seems, excused as humour.

This permissive culture of humour use extends even to satire with its openly critical intent compared to more happy-go-lucky jokes and general humour. Satire can be applied very freely in Australia, both to individuals and to political as well as other topics. Politicians have effectively been regarded as fair game from the early days of white settlement when they were frequently third sons or ne'er-do-wells sent out to the colonies from Great Britain. Despite current debate about the limits of free speech and increasing hesitation over cultural sensitivities (in the wake of religious terrorism, for example), political figures continue to be pilloried in satirical cartoons without much reprisal.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Australian satire enjoys unique legal protection from copyright, if not from defamation law.<sup>11</sup> One eminent jurist well versed in tackling corruption in Australia describes satire as “the most important form of public humour”, designed to make society “examine itself critically and confront its deficiencies”.<sup>12</sup>

### SATIRE, POLITICS AND CARTOONING

The marriage of satire and politics seems natural. Both set out to say—perhaps even to do—something serious about life. Satire’s name derives from a literary tradition of *serio ludere* (to play in earnest) that dates back to Lucian of Samosata (c.120–180 CE). Its playfulness can range from sunny and light to a savage indignation (Jonathan Swift’s *saeva indignatio*)<sup>13</sup> that is so bleak that it barely functions as humour.<sup>14</sup> When the term “satire” is used loosely (as often today) to apply to anything funny or amusing, its defining moral aspect is undercut: it is essentially humour with a critical purpose.<sup>15</sup> Applied to politics, its purpose can be intentionally partisan, either in pursuit of a particular political agenda or to comment on politicians individually or collectively. Despite the views of

some critics, its agenda may be of either the left or right, since hypocrisy (among its other targets) recognises no political boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes the topic may be the folly or confusion of the electorate or of the system as a whole, but more often it is the failings of those who claim to lead the nation and make decisions on its behalf, in the best interests of “the people”.

Since classical times, cartoon drawing has been linked to political satire, exploiting the fact that one image is worth a thousand words.<sup>17</sup> While literature, drama and polemical writing have all played their parts in advancing satire, the encapsulation of a message into an image, whether performed or printed, gives satire an immediate bite. Cartoons are an exceptionally condensed form of imagery which means that they also benefit more readily than long texts or performances from mass distribution, enhancing the outreach of the satire. It could be said that they play a leading role in the creation of satire, whether purely as images, or employing words and action as well. From satirical paintings on ancient Greek vases to English eighteenth-century broadsheet cartoons like the one in Fig. 2.1 (see Chap. 2), the essential features of cartooning—caricature, compression and ambivalence of meaning—have served to amuse and inform their audiences. When cartoons began to be regularly included in newspapers and journals as part of journalistic and editorial commentary upon the times, their outreach and impact grew enormously.

Today, as the role of the press changes under the pressure of new media, cartoons about politics and daily life are no longer a compulsory newspaper feature.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, however, satirical commentary about politics and other things has been taken up by broadcast and electronic media. Combining moving images with static ones, and performance satire with visual as well as written texts, the new kinds of e-satire explored by later chapters in this book continue to rely on the same basic features of cartooning, caricature, compression and ambivalence of meaning. Such continuity is not surprising, given the extraordinary power of a single cartoon to encapsulate complex messages via its brevity and reduced outline. For admirers of the 1980s UK TV series *Yes Minister*, the satirical brilliance of the entire show is evoked by one of Gerald Scarfe’s images shown in Figs. 8.1 and 8.2 (discussed by Conal Condren in Chap. 8). Each of these meta-cartoons recalls by means of a few unrealistic and stylised images the fully realised dramatic satire-series, with its multiple characters, plots and dialogue. Such is the power of cartooning and hence their importance to this chapter and the book as a whole.

Despite this—perhaps because of it—the academic study of cartoons, especially political ones, spreads across many different disciplines, making

it difficult to define as a research topic. As creative works, cartoons in general are too sketchy to fit well into art history and theory; as part of communication studies, they are confusingly ambivalent in their meaning and impact. In cultural history, their topicality makes them quintessentially ephemeral and difficult of access without the precise requisite knowledge (the older cartoons discussed in this book are necessarily accompanied by background explanations). Vivid and eye-catching objects, they are worthy of study as much for what they can tell us about politics and society as for their own skill and artistry. Exploring and mapping the field is the subject of Chap. 5 by Khin Wee Chen, Robert Phiddian and Ronald Stewart, who have assessed a wide range of disparate types of research, seeking to locate appropriate methodologies and collate firm findings about the nature of political cartoons in general.

As a result, the authors identify six major subfields: meta-studies or surveys of political cartoons, the properties of political cartoons, their function as cultural mirrors, the impact of political cartoons, audience reception, and the cartoon ecosystem. Focusing principally on static images in print news media—editorial cartoons, caricatures, strip and pocket cartoons—that are used to comment on newsworthy events and figures, the authors distinguish work on political cartoons from contiguous work on non-political cartoon books and animations and on political satire in prose and/or TV and digital media. Their chapter not only provides a theoretical underpinning to a book in which cartoons play an important evidentiary role, but essential guidance for future researchers in the fields of both cartooning and satire.

This approach is taken a step further by Lucien Leon in Chap. 6 as he examines how individual cartoonists work today, and how in composition technique and method of distribution they respond to the emergence of new media and new ways to reach audiences. Leon points out that, while it is now easier for amateurs to enter the field, neither they nor the professional cartoonists can be assured of access to a lasting and loyal audience when instant choice increasingly rests with the consumer, not the producer and publisher. His case studies include practitioners from Australia, the USA and the UK, who have successfully transitioned from print to digital media via animation and social media. Their experience demonstrates not only the continuing importance of cartooning technique, but how all would-be political cartoonists must recognise and embrace the challenge of maintaining a constant engagement with digital technology if this traditionally significant input to the democratic conversation is to be maintained in the new media. Even if political satire is in some ways shape-shifting under the combined

impetus of the Internet and today's instant communications, it is evidently not dying out.

### SATIRE AND POLITICS: THE WESTMINSTER INHERITANCE

Despite the changes noted above in media and formats of expression, the role of satire in today's political discourse may in fact be stronger than ever. In Chap. 2, Mark Rolfe traces the descent of a tradition of satirical imagery inherited from the early days of emerging party politics in the British Isles that passed first to America and thence to Australasia. He identifies a close nexus between the Westminster parliamentary tradition and the freedom to ridicule the battle for political power that takes place between parties and individuals. All claim to speak for democracy and equality but may be equally unsavoury in their private lives if not their public dealings. Politics being the art only of the possible, the election of candidates who promise something new—a fresh beginning and a change at the top—rarely fulfils voter expectations in practice. That feeds a pervasive disillusion with politics and politicians as a breed. Such tensions, Rolfe concludes, are inherent in representative democracy and satire about the topic both reflects and contributes to the disillusionment. Satirists do not so much speak truth to power as reflect this legacy view of politicians as participants in a dirty, slippery game of spin and dubious language. Since the game shows no signs of changing, satirists will continue to feed on it.

The vexed issue of whether political satire thus creates, reinforces, or merely reflects public disillusion with democratic politics is foregrounded in several chapters. In different ways, both Conal Condren and Rebecca Higgie explore the attraction that satire holds for its own victims and how in some circumstances they can successfully find their own uses for the humiliation that satiric mockery seemingly delivers to them. In Chap. 8, Condren shines a new light on the fame attained by the British TV series *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, by carefully dissecting its verbal tropes and their relation to the universally familiar “language of politics and government”. From archival sources, he reveals that it was the firm belief of then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that the show aided her own agenda of public service reform. It exposed accurately enough the realities of Whitehall and the Byzantine evasions of its mandarins as they sought to frustrate changes proposed by elected ministers. The public was assumed to be amused and entertained, but also made indignant and thus more likely to back real-life reform. Yet in most

episodes, the laugh is on the Prime Minister—the very figure that one might suppose to represent Mrs Thatcher herself (and which she herself acted on one famous occasion). Condren concludes that putting too much weight on well-worn binary abstractions like theory and practice, satire and political reality, leads to a simplistic interpretation of these political satires—and perhaps of satire in general. Integrated into political discourse, satire achieves not a singular but a variable relationship to actual political practice and the promotion of specific policies. It may raise issues of political accountability and ministerial responsibility, differing notions of representation, and Orwellian dogmas about political language, but satire also creates its own vision of the nature of politics. As always with humour, simple answers are unsafe.

### THE IMPACT OF SATIRE

What can we know about the actual impact of satire on its audiences? Does it support the workings of a democracy, or does it undermine them by encouraging cynicism among voters? In Chap. 3, Rebecca Higgie explores the process of real-time political co-option being practised in contemporary satire, whereby politicians successfully adopt the satirical vehicle for their own purposes in a way that diminishes or even neutralises the possibility of satirical critique. Celebrated as a form of criticism that holds politicians to account, satire must surely compromise its own *raison d'être* when it behaves in this way. But even as contemporary media satirists have gained public trust and prominence, so politicians have appeared more frequently on their programmes. They are interviewed by comedians, they play along in quiz or panel show games, appear in scripted skits and even participate in public self-satirisation. Evidence surveyed by Higgie from both the UK and the USA shows how this redounds to the benefit of the politician. She brings to bear theories of how a dominant culture can absorb and reframe counterculture as merely a consumer product, developing her own theory of the political co-option of satire. The result convincingly demonstrates how satire's oft-celebrated critical edge is blunted when politicians are able to use it to their own advantage as a public relations tool.

This vital and contested issue of the effects of satire on its audiences is also pursued by Alison O'Connor in Chap. 7. She focuses on the Internet and other new media methods allowing researchers to garner self-reported voter reactions to actual candidates standing for office. The issue is one of substantial economic as well as political significance, since