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# Tweedledum and Tweedledee

Political Satire in the 1996 Australian Federal Election

Robert Phiddian  
with Murray Bramwell and Amanda Roe

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But I cannot quit this Affair of Elections, before I take notice a little of the general behaviour of the gentry and Persons of Quality, in order to their Election—What is become of our Comedians? Ah, Rochester, Shadwell, Orway, Oldham, where is your Genius? Certainly, no subject ever deserv'd so much to be exposed, nothing so fruitful in banter, or deserv'd more to be ridicul'd.

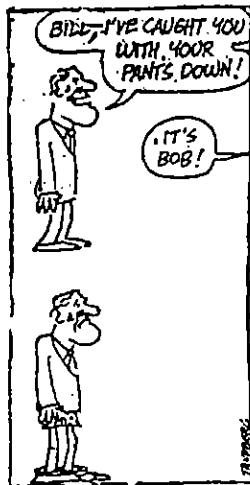
Daniel Defoe, *Review* vol. V, no. 31, Tuesday, June 8, 1708

Like Defoe, we thought that there should be some good jokes in an election campaign. What he writes about the big Whig victory of 1708, we assumed would also apply to the Australian federal election of March 1996. If ever there was an occasion when the public satirists in the various media could intervene significantly in national debate, to expose cant and concealed agendas, surely this was it. But, like Defoe, we were destined to be disappointed. With few exceptions, the satirists did not succeed in getting outside the tent of political simulation that is modern campaigning. They could not perform their appointed task of pissing back and damaging the water-proofing on the tight platitudes and photo-opportunities so thoughtfully provided to the media by the party machines.

We started from the assumption that satire can contribute sharply to the direction and momentum of opinion during a campaign.

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Though hard to prove, this perception was fuelled by the memory of interventions such as this one by Tandberg that appeared on the front page of the *Age* on the first morning of Fraser's last campaign:



Ron Tandberg, *Age*, 4 February 1983. Courtesy the *Age*

This cartoon captured the structure of the campaign in a simple frame. From day one in 1983, all the momentum was with Hawke and the ALP and Fraser looked doomed. Max Gillies was similarly surgical in a paid advertisement for the ALP in the 1990 campaign in which he depicted John Elliott (then president of the Liberal Party) as a sleazy salesman. He proclaims himself an ordinary Australian bloke who likes a beer, so he bought a beer company (Fosters Brewing), likes his footy, so he bought a football club (Carlton Football Club), and likes his politics, so he bought a political party (the Liberal Party). This advertisement attacked the Liberals as the party of entrepreneurial big business; it was a joke that had clear political effects.

So satire can shape public opinion in election campaigns but, unfortunately, it doesn't have to. Our expectations for the 1996 campaign were not fulfilled, as the whole show proved not to be very funny. Possibly this view is coloured by political disappointment at the way things developed, but we are not the first people to argue that the campaign was signally lifeless and we aim to explain here how and why political satire was complicit in that lifelessness.

We studied several major newspapers,<sup>1</sup> magazines, whatever we could find on television, and kept an ear to the radio (for geographical reasons, we only heard things that went to air in Adelaide). The bias in our materials is that we focused on media from south-eastern Australia; this restriction is unfortunate, especially considering the weird result in Queensland, and the significance of the Mundingburra by-election in that state, but time did not allow us to widen the net. This paper focuses primarily on the cartoonists operating in major daily newspapers rather than on the periodical and electronic media: they were the ones forced by the terms of their employment to deal with the election on a day-to-day basis, and it was they who provided a substantial amount of what we consider representative material.

The thing that most obviously needs to be explained in a survey of political satire in the 1996 election is what it was that kept satirical passion at bay. An absence of passion is a hard thing to *prove*—you can show that it is not there in the examples you choose, but can only ask your reader to assume that you are not ignoring a body of evidence that counts against it. Nevertheless, we invite you to entertain the proposition as a hypothesis. The three basic reasons that satire remained relatively tame during the campaign were (1) the sense that the election was a form of entertainment put on by experts for the benefit of the voters, (2) the pressures on the media (including satirists) to be even-handed, and (3) the failure of the arch-satirist of Australian political life, Paul Keating, to start a good brawl.

#### The sense that the election was a form of entertainment put on by experts

On the Monday morning after the election was called (the first working day), 5AN (Adelaide ABC) was already putting its first expert analysis of media coverage of the campaign to air. Much discussion of media perceptions followed during the campaign, and since the election there have been two television documentaries screened about the way the media operated and were 'managed' by the party organizations. Never has it been so clear to everyone that campaigning is a matter of massaging and disseminating images. The coalition's

photogenic launch of its environmental policies in a forest near Melbourne and Keating being mobbed by screaming schoolgirls in suburban Sydney are examples of the new image politics that have taken over from old-fashioned methods like discussing policies or detailed political pork-barrelling. The simulated photo-opportunity has brought with it the reign of the political expert, adept at reading the signs and portents of modern campaigning. These people, be they former politicians, party apparatchiks, academics, advertising executives, journalists or media 'personalities', are part of the political process, and they present that process to the general public in the manner that most suits their purposes.

Paul Keating put it with typical bluntness when he distinguished between the business of governing (which goes on between elections) and the business of getting elected. He often insisted during his career as treasurer and prime minister that he could 'flick the switch to vaudeville' whenever it suited him. This suggests that the punters get a carefully choreographed show of ritual postures and concerns at election time, and pay for it with their votes. Then they leave government to the experts for another three years. That Keating projected this with such clarity was one of the major ingredients of the 'arrogance' that turned so many voters against him, but it is, increasingly, one of the underlying assumptions of Australian political life, common to all who are professionally involved in the political process.

Quite clearly this includes the media and satirical commentators, but it raises extra problems for them, because they have a countervailing duty to rend the tissue of simulations. Certainly, the media were obsessed by the level of management achieved by the party campaigns, and clearly they felt manipulated. However, by and large they fell for it: they did little more than grumble about it, they settled too often and too easily into talking about themselves, and, for the most part, they fed the public the predigested product delivered to them by the party machines. Though their level of distaste was often high—as can be seen most clearly in the SBS documentary first shown on 27 August 1996—they remained paralysed before the professionalism of those who controlled the flow of information. The most chilling moment comes near the end of the program, when both of the campaign chiefs, Labor and Liberal, express satisfaction about the media coverage they have received. If they are happy with the media, how should the public feel?

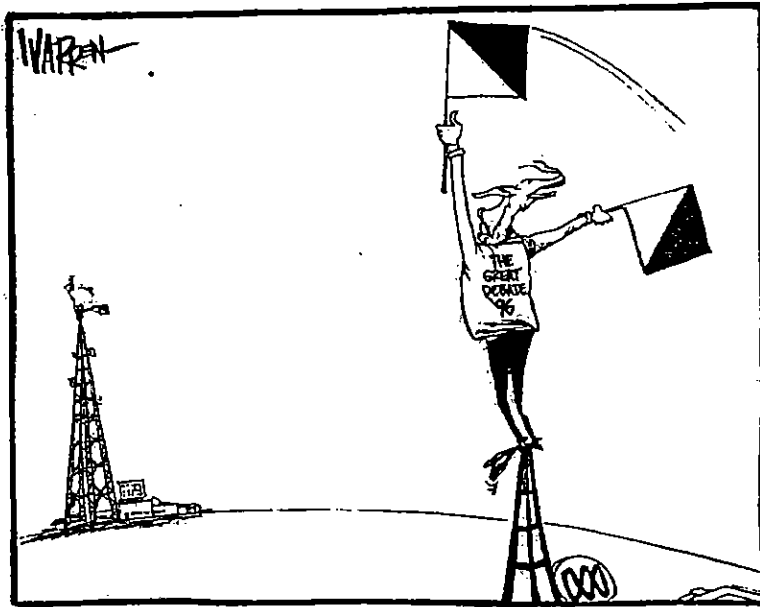
During the campaign, cartoonists tended to become part of the election entertainment industry (as did Gerry Connolly and *McFeast* in other media) with cartoons that, on the one hand, were merely comic and, on the other, cartoons that did little more than confirm the cynical public perception that *all* politicians are a lying pack of knaves and fools. These two threads of comic entertainment and 'a plague on both your houses' cynicism may appear to be opposed, but their effects were similar as they both took the assumption of contentless political posturing for granted. Neither thread concentrated the mind of its audience on the issue of making a choice between alternative platforms.

Leunig's savage 'Two Parrots' does the 'plague on both your houses' line powerfully:



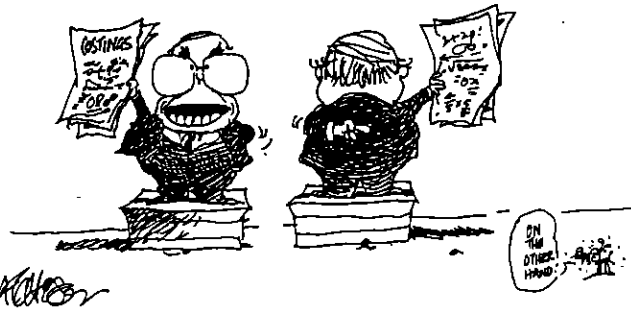
Michael Leunig, *Age*, 1 February 1996. Courtesy the *Age*

This is a scathing attack on the emptiness of political debate, but what it does not do is make any attempt to distinguish between what the 'bloody politicians' might stand for. As a blanket judgement, this cartoon is brilliant, but many of the cartoons that follow the line that all politicians are politicians are fairly anodyne:



Warren Brown, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 February 1996. Courtesy the *Daily Telegraph*

This picks up the greatest non-issue of the campaign: who would host the debates between Howard and Keating, and on what channel they would appear. Indeed, the Debate debate illustrates the extent to which televisual positioning became the major area of conflict between the parties, but this cartoon only plays along with the theme rather than exposing it in any significantly satirical manner. Similarly, Atchison's depiction of Howard with his fingers crossed behind his back does little more than confirm a generally held view that politicians are fibbers:



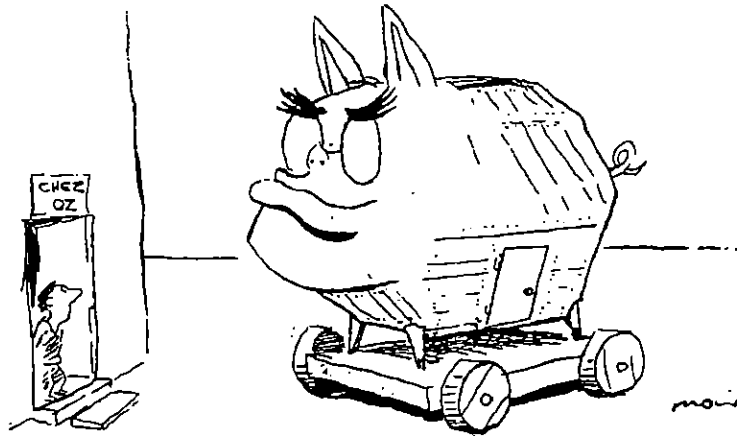
Michael Atchison, *Advertiser*, 16 February 1996. Courtesy the *Advertiser*

And Leunig's 'Candidate' indicates that even the most talented cartoonists can have slow days:

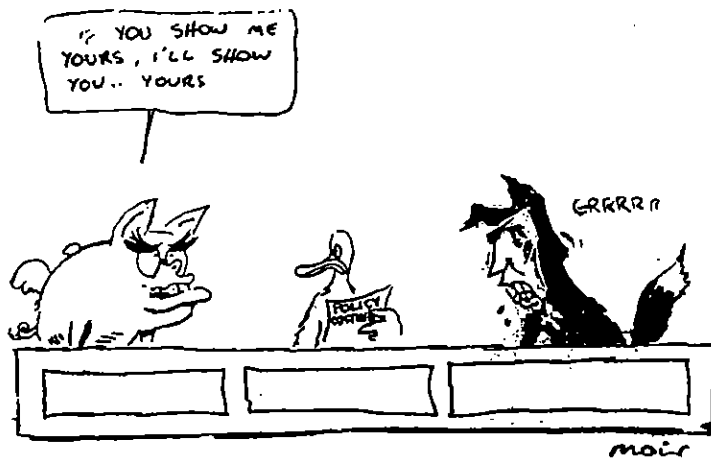


Michael Leunig, *Age*, 8 February 1996. Courtesy the *Age*

One of the major problems faced by newspaper cartoonists is that they have to come up with several publishable images a week, whether or not inspiration strikes them or events conspire to give them good material. As the party campaigns were so controlled during this election, there is a sense in which they can hardly be blamed for accepting that entertainment was often the only option. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Moir's whimsical *Babe* theme is a good example of space on an editorial page amusingly filled. The conceit that underpins this series is that Howard is the pig who would be prime minister, while Keating is the real (but increasingly exasperated) border collie. To identify the leader of the opposition as a pig playing out of species is hardly a straightforward compliment, but the logic of the conceit turns him into a lovable battler who, in the film as in electoral life, must achieve his impossible dream. It says something about the public attitude towards politicians that depicting Howard as a pig has the effect of humanizing him:



Alan Moir, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 1996. Courtesy *Sydney Morning Herald*

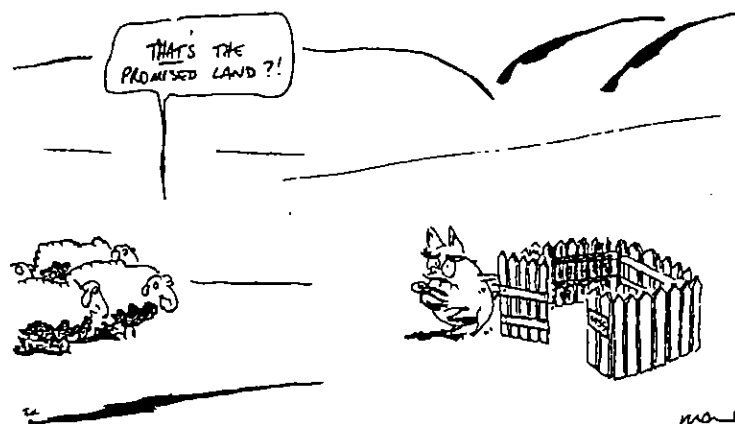


Alan Moir, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 1996. Courtesy *Sydney Morning Herald*

The first of these is another comic reprise on the Debate debate theme, and is one of many cartoons that depict a violent Keating slaver in his eagerness to attack his opponent. Howard as Trojan Pig is a much funnier cartoon, and is beginning to point to a deeper critical analysis. It also points to an incredulity commonly felt among journalists, academics and others at the proposition that a coalition victory might really come to pass.



This is most brilliantly put in this last cartoon:



Alan Moir, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 1996. Courtesy *Sydney Morning Herald*

Despite compelling evidence in public-opinion surveys, Moir cannot quite believe that the electorate will choose to follow Howard into a promised land labelled 1995. This is harsh and perceptive about the message the coalition was purveying, the spurious offer of a 'comfortable and relaxed' vision of an older, sentimentalized Australia. But it also fails fully to register the strength of the general desire in the electorate for a less arduous public life. Like many in the opinion-making business, Moir could not see why ordinary voters (here depicted, perhaps symptomatically, as sheep) might want to reject the brave new world for which Keating kept claiming responsibility.

The pressures on the media (including the satirists) to be even-handed

In any campaign, the media make conspicuous attempts to appear even-handed in their coverage of the parties and the issues, but the pressure for perceived fairness was even greater than usual in this campaign. First, the Canberra press gallery was thought by many to be a menagerie of Keating's creatures, whom he had trained up

to obedience by a combination of several carrots and plenty of stick. They had to show clean hands, especially after episodes of harshness towards the coalition over the previous thirteen years. Second, there was very strong evidence from the opinion polls that a change of government was in the air. This sense of the advent of a new political order seems to have bred caution, particularly towards those who were headed for the ministerial benches. Third, there were few obvious differences in the parties' announced platforms, so journalists' own views about policies and issues were not directly engaged. The fact that no-one had much faith in the sincerity of the promises being made only added to a critical disengagement that asked to be mistaken for fairness. Finally, both sides managed themselves competently and neither party's campaign blew up. With the partial exception of the forged-letters affair that made the Treasurer, Ralph Willis, look ridiculous in the last week,<sup>2</sup> there were no easy pickings for journalists looking for something to expose; in particular, the coalition managed to keep its finger off the self-destruct button it had hammered so reliably in every election since 1984.

So, presented with professionally organized, politically superficial campaigns, the media tended to react 'professionally' themselves, as if it were their job to represent the campaign fairly to the public (an admirable aim in a democracy), and to interpret it primarily in terms of campaign performance rather than political content (a more dubious objective). All these pressures and perceptions applied to the satirists. While most cartoonists appear to be to the left of their papers' editorial lines by instinct, most of them tried on this occasion to be even-handed. Some even seem to have prided themselves on this, if the selections made by the *Age* cartoonists of their best cartoons of the campaign (*Age*, 1 March 1996) are anything to go by. Most of them chose oddly disengaged images as their best, and even the normally ruthless Petty chose one with a tame athletics motif (Keating cutting the corner to be level with Howard in the home straight), when he had much stronger material to choose from.

According to Max Gillies (in a conversation held on 9 May 1996), there are often personal and informal pressures on a political satirist

to give all sides a 'fair go', but this rather assumes that all sides have an equal right to one. He feels that it is important to resist these pressures, for the satirist to stand up for what she or he believes, rather than to accede to the notion that all views are valid and all truths relative. In this campaign cartoonists became too closely associated with the fair-go mentality that the news media took on. They resisted the temptation (or avoided the responsibility) to take up satire's wild authority to judge and condemn, restricting themselves to more balanced comedy.

The view that there were few substantive policy differences between the parties, that both were making implausible promises, and that the Labor government was tired and due for a spell in opposition, became received wisdom during the campaign, and satirists were inclined for various reasons, institutional and temperamental, to assent to this.

Consider the situation of John Clarke and Brian Dawe, shoe-horned into the end-of-the-week slot on Kerry Packer's Channel 9's *A Current Affair*. Searching satirical analysis is always going to be emasculated when book-ended with Ray Martin's famous grin, and the benefits of a very wide audience are restricted by the 'lightness' of the program. During the campaign, *ACA* and Martin gave John Howard a pretty good run as the little Aussie battler and all-round good bloke. It would have been institutionally impossible for Clarke and Dawe to attack him too directly. So they went for the 'plague on both your houses' model, presenting Clarke as both Howard and Keating nearly every week of the campaign. Though the burden of criticism in the sketches fell more heavily on Howard and his lack of candour about what was really going to happen after the election, the structure of the situation suggested overwhelmingly that both leaders were politicians, two peas in a pod and consequently equally contemptible by definition. Any taking of sides was undermined by the Tweedledum and Tweedledee logic of the situation.<sup>3</sup>

A lot of work during the campaign employed similar structural symmetry. Consider this example from Peter Nicholson:



Peter Nicholson, *Australian*, 7 February 1996. Courtesy the *Australian*

This is solid comedy; it works with the recognition of a cherished children's story, and picks up the twin threads of the Puddin's prickly aggression and the idea of 'cut and come again' (which seemed to be both leaders' first principle when it came to the funding of their election promises). It succeeds by making both leaders look like vaguely threatening dills, but the crucial point here is that they are made into nearly identical dills. Symmetry like this occurred in so many cartoons that it seems to have been a fall-back convention for days when inspiration did not flow freely to those with editorial deadlines.

#### Paul Keating failed to start a good brawl

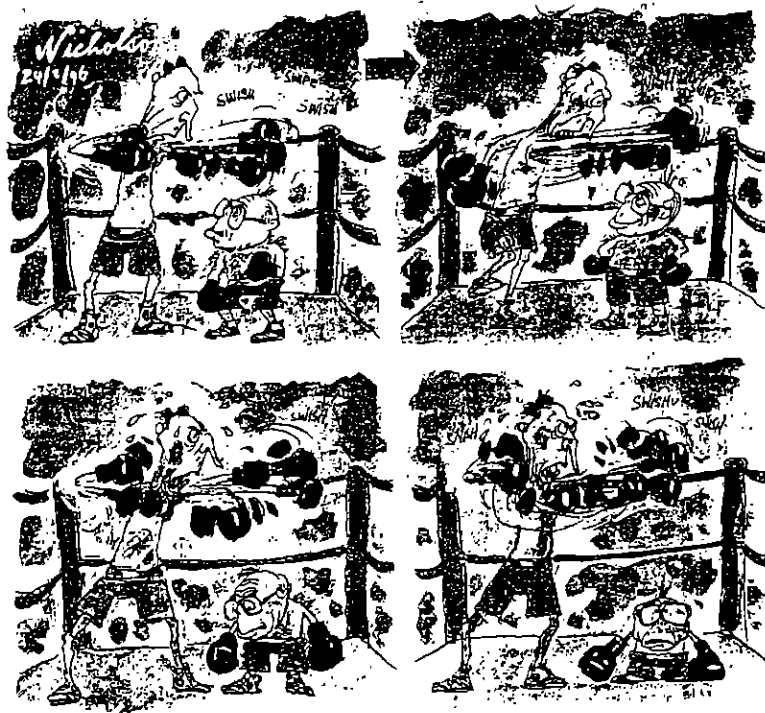
For more than a decade, Keating was the dominant satirical force in Australian political life. He was supreme on the floor of parliament, the master of its theatre and of its 'language'<sup>4</sup> of bluff and vituperation. He carried this satirical aggression over into executive government and party matters, and into his dealings with the media both publicly and in the notorious private 'briefings' that press gallery

journalists apparently received over the phone if they told a story 'incorrectly'. He dominated political life and divided people into devotees and opponents. Nobody with even a faint interest in politics was indifferent towards Keating, and few managed even to be ambivalent.

Interestingly, no cartoonist, writer or comic impersonator has been able to 'capture' Keating in the way Tandberg captured Fraser and Gillies became Hawke. Even Gerry Connolly's popular impersonation of Keating lacked the presence, the sense of menace. Connolly's Keating had too much of the buffoon about him and not enough energy, as was particularly evident during the campaign in the TV sketches where Connolly-as-Keating went out to confront Howard at campaign events. Our pet theory is that no satirist captured Keating because, at some level, they recognized that he was one of them and were scared of him. This is, at least, one way of understanding one of the oddest political events of our time, the transformation of Don Watson. In the mid-eighties he was one of Max Gillies' scriptwriters, responsible in particular for the words behind Gillies' famous rendition of Bob Hawke. Subsequently he became the chief speech-writer for a real prime minister, Keating, responsible for the words of such landmark statements as the Redfern speech on Aboriginal reconciliation. This startling instance of a 'poacher turned gamekeeper' might be ascribed to fellow feeling, for Keating—like Menzies and Whitlam, but distinct from Hawke and Howard—belongs to a parliamentary tradition that employs satire as one of its chief weapons.

What we want to call Keating's satirical aggression was, however, much more widely understood as arrogance, and he did his best to suppress it during the campaign. The much vaunted battle of wits between Keating and Howard never got under way, which must have been an advantage to the deeply unfunny Liberal leader.

Nicholson points this out well. Keating keeps swinging, but the target is so small that he finds nothing to hit. This was part of the problem for cartoonists too:



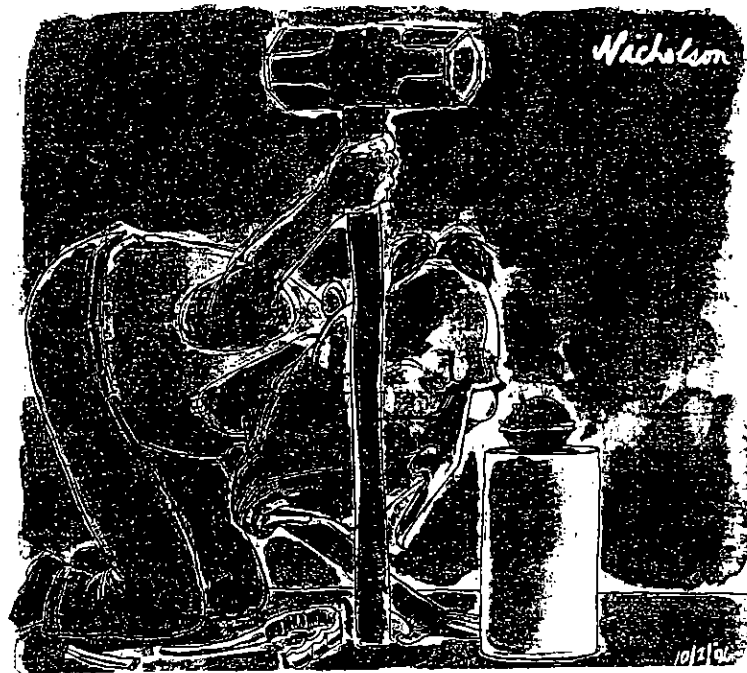
Peter Nicholson, *Australian*, 24 February 1996. Courtesy the *Australian*

There were a few reasons for this non-event. The strongest was the coalition strategy to avoid every fight and do as little as possible to scare anybody.<sup>5</sup> However, another reason is more material to the present case. Keating and his minders decided that the impression of his 'arrogance' was so strong in the public mind that he had to attempt to be nice. In particular, it appears that ALP national secretary and campaign manager Gary Gray was determined that the leader's image be softened because the qualitative opinion polling kept bringing arrogance up as a problem. There were divisions between Gray's and Keating's offices on this, but the ALP campaign never launched an all-out attack. Apparently, 'the view' from the ALP polling was that 'even a mild criticism of Howard by Keating would be seen as another example of Keating's vicious personality, whereas Howard's attacks on Keating, however thinly based, struck a chord with the public'.<sup>6</sup> The dissonance between the central and prime

minister's offices resulted in an ALP campaign that oscillated between short bouts of charismatic aggression and long spells of cautious niceness. It didn't play to the strengths of the leader, and it didn't work either.<sup>7</sup>

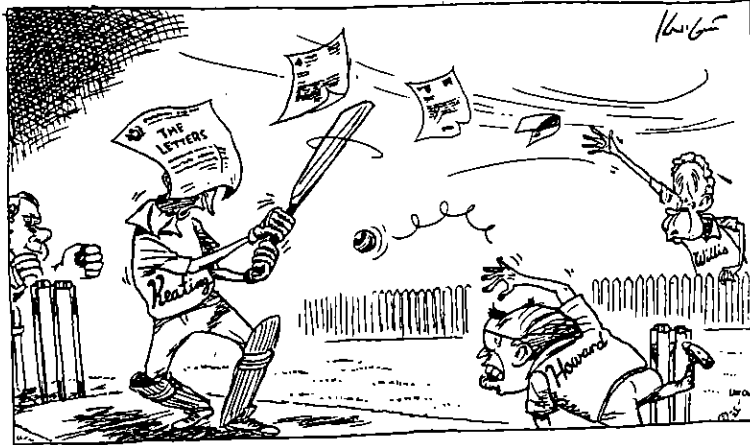
Consider the smiling Uncle Paul who appeared at the two televised debates. He made extensive efforts to appear laid back and statesmanlike, and refused to get annoyed, no matter how frantic Howard became (especially at the start of the second debate). It may have been good politics (though it is hard to imagine how it could have turned out much worse on polling day), but it certainly made for bad theatre. Keating's playing out of character definitely accentuated the sense that the campaign was drab, and reduced the satirical pressure.

The sense of a missed confrontation led to a string cartoons that represent a battle that never quite got under way:



Peter Nicholson, *Australian*, 12 February 1996. Courtesy the *Australian*

This cartoon is one of several that pursued the Big Paul, Little Johnny line, presenting politics as principally a conflict of styles. The cheerfully dumb recalcitrance on the face of Howard-as-nut is quite brilliant, and it tells us something about how the game of politics was going; but it tells us only that. Similarly, the *Herald Sun* cartoon by



Mark Knight, *Herald Sun*, 1 March 1996. Courtesy the *Herald Sun*

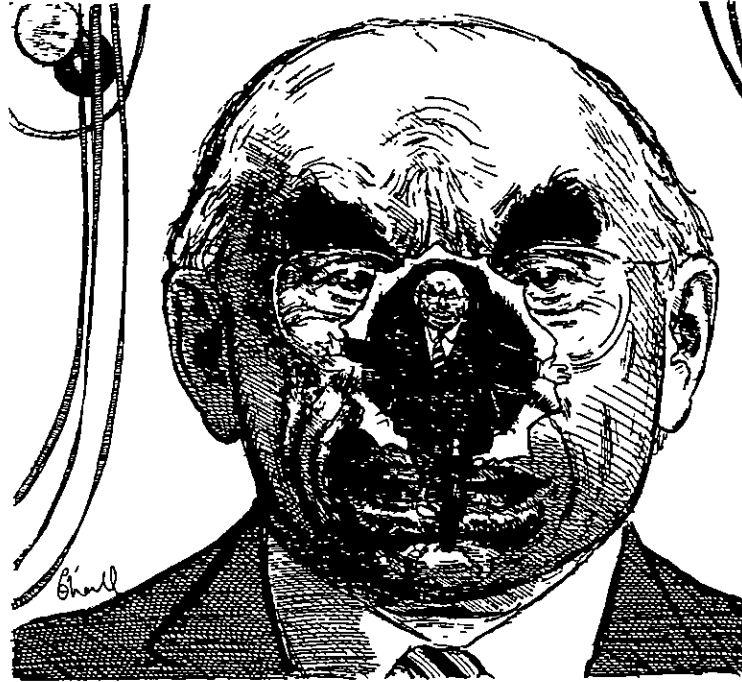
Mark Knight is one of many sporting cartoons, here treating politics as a metaphor for cricket. It shows the master batsman, Keating, undermined by the idiocy of his treasurer's belief in the legitimacy of the fake letters, and about to be bowled by a leg-break from the old trundler, Howard. It is an amusing enough reflection of the situation (it came out the day before the election), but it lacks satirical energy. One reason for this was the arch-political satirist's failure to play his role to intensify battle, as he had done in 1987 when he ripped a hole in Howard's tax package and in 1993 when he hung on like a terrier to Hewson and his GST.

### Conclusion

It would be falsifying the evidence to suggest that there were no good cartoons during the campaign, that no-one saw beyond the spin doctors' and the media scrum's consensus that it was merely a matter



of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Petty in the *Age* kept a harsh and funny eye on issues and policies and on the dangers of letting the system become debased by cynicism. And O'Neill in the *Financial Review* came up with the odd gem, like this one of the Howard-alien bursting out of Howard:

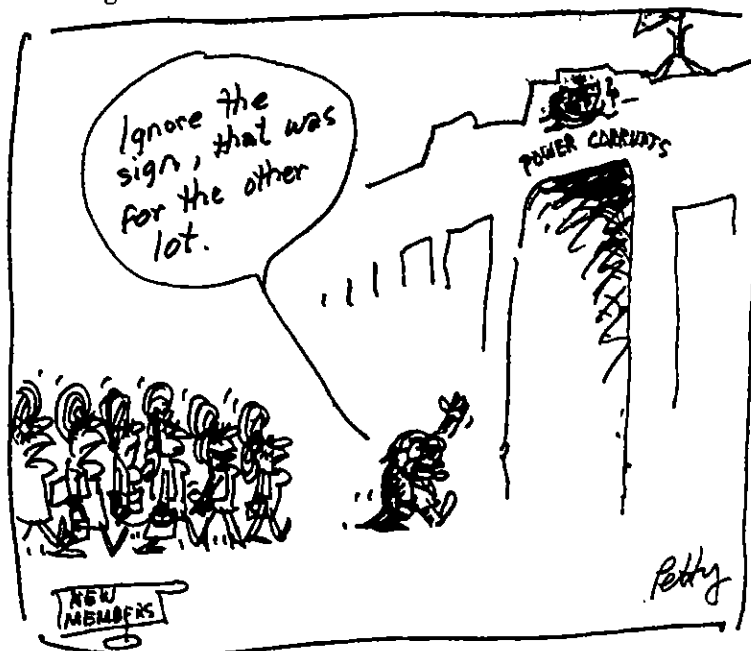


Ward O'Neill, *Australian Financial Review*, 19 February 1996. Courtesy *Australian Financial Review*

This insists that the same little man has always been there, beneath the surface of the same little man, and one can imagine that the self-righteous and self-serving distinction between core promises and other promises might come out of a face like this. But, in general, the cartooning was tepid. It did little to focus or heighten debate about the real choices on offer at the ballot box and was part of the culture of blandness that engulfed the campaign. Indulging in cynicism and reflecting the politics of style, it did little more than reiterate the obvious.

Then the election happened. The coalition won in a landslide and there was a very considerable level of shock in the body politic. Clarke and Doyle were suddenly strong again on *A Current Affair* (until they were axed in early 1997). Cook was savage in the *Bulletin* and *Full Frontal* even began to do political sketches. In one of the odder (and more unverifiable) events in Australian theatre history, Gillies' travelling political review became much funnier and more pointed, without making any substantial changes to the script that had been running since January. Suddenly satirical commentators realized that the election had mattered after all, and the next one was three whole years away.

Three great cartoons can be used to mark this point of transition:



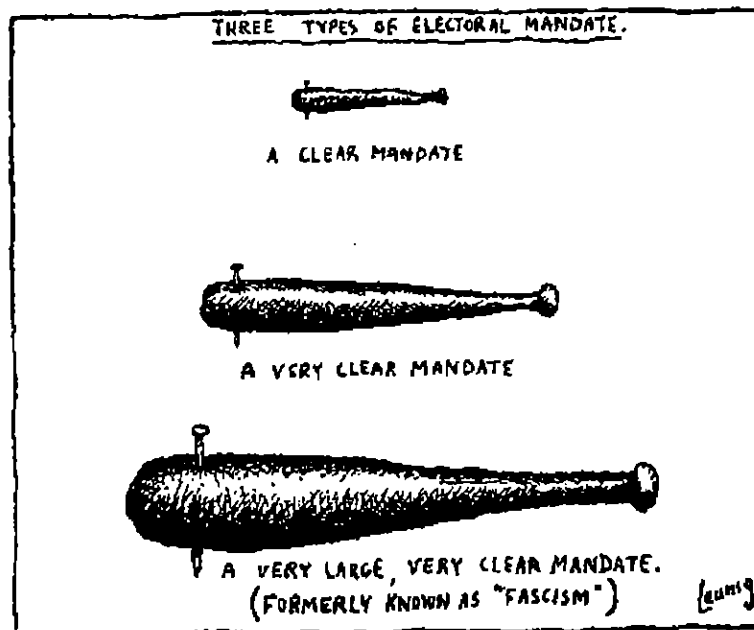
Bruce Petty, *Age*, 9 March 1996. Courtesy the *Age*

This catches Howard's stolid self-righteousness perfectly, and exposes the venial side of politics much more powerfully than the lighter campaign cynicism allowed. Even the crooked lines are angry.



Ward O'Neill, *Australian Financial Review*, 13 March 1996. Courtesy *Australian Financial Review*

This focuses on the central fraud of the campaign, the virtual reality of budget surplus in which both sides made their promises. Everyone knew that the projections were a fiction that would be exposed after the election, but it was in no politician's interest to admit this. Labor could not afford to release fresh figures showing a decline in the nation's prospects; they were running on their record as economic managers and promising reward for sacrifices made under their rule. However, the coalition benefited most from the phoney war that engulfed the whole campaign. They could promise that, on the government's figures, they would need to cut nothing, so they needed to expose none of the sharp edges of their small-government ideology. Moreover, they could blame the other side for the fact that their own promises were unbelievable. O'Neill's Costello looks so utterly rehearsed that he is fooling no-one, least of all himself; the politics fell out so beautifully for him that he didn't have to.



Michael Leunig, *Age*, 8 March 1996. Courtesy the *Age*

This is a chilling cartoon. It doesn't need much explanation, and it encourages meditation, but it isn't at all abstract. Without any dilution of its power, it refers simultaneously to the Howard victory and to the state election Jeff Kennett had just called in Victoria. In particular, it picks up the words of Howard's victory speech, 'We have been elected with a mandate, a very powerful mandate . . .'<sup>8</sup>

So, since the election, everything has been much funnier. But the disturbing thing is that satire flourished only when it was too late for it to make a difference. We would like to think that satire is more than entertainment, that it is a way of contributing to public debate that short-circuits the hypocrisies of 'managed' public discourse. The 1996 campaign does not provide good evidence for this proposition. And disturbing possibilities suggest themselves. Does satire secretly thrive on impotence? Is it more an outlet for frustrated anger than a progressive way of cleansing the public life of dangerous illusions? Does it court and then benefit from rejection? Does it make nothing happen?

During the reign of Keating, the charismatic and satirical prime minister (since 1991, and especially since the 1993 election), political satire did not prosper. Those in the game do not seem to have wanted to ridicule Keating and his government, or to have found any consistent targets. Perhaps Australian satirists knew in some dank corner of their collective unconscious that a conservative government would provide them with better material, and they kept their heads down.

## NOTES

The research for this piece was shared equally among all three authors, and responsibility for putting the words together fell to Robert Phiddian. All cartoons are reprinted with the permission of the artists and their respective publications, and we would like to thank all involved for having the good grace to make their material available for an article that is not merely a celebration of the cartoonist's art, but also has some critical points to make.

- 1 The Murdoch-owned papers, the *Australian*, the *Adelaide Advertiser*, the *Melbourne Herald Sun* and the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*; the Fairfax *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Melbourne Age* and *Financial Review*; and the Stokes-owned *Canberra Times*.
- 2 Apparently Paul Keating feels that the letters affair decisively scuttled a reasonable hope of victory; see John Edwards, *Keating: The Inside Story* (Penguin, Ringwood, 1996), pp. 540-1. Nobody else finds this a very convincing analysis.
- 3 Interestingly, John Clarke and Brian Dawe's compilation of their more memorable segments put to air between 1992 and 1996, *Bananas in Electorates* (Sony Music Entertainment, Sydney, 1997), passes over the work done in the 1996 campaign. That not even one of the segments should reach the top 35 selected for the video seems to be a recognition by the pair that they were not on top of their game at the time.
- 4 On Keating's 'language', see Meaghan Morris, *Ecstasy and Economics: American Essays for John Forbes* (emPress, Sydney, 1992).
- 5 See Pamela Williams, *The Victory: The Inside Story of the Takeover of Australia* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997), for a detailed exposition of this strategy.
- 6 See Mike Steketee, 'Divided unto Death', *Weekend Australian*, 22-23 June 1996, Review section, pp. 1,4.
- 7 Rodney Cavalier, 'An insider on the outside: A personal view of why Labor was always going to lose the 1996 federal election', in *The Politics of Retribution: The 1996 Australian Federal Election*, ed. Clive Bean et al. (Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1997), pp. 23-33, argues precisely the opposite case, that Labor was saved from complete disaster to the extent that Gray's central party campaign managed to restrain Keating.
- 8 Williams, *The Victory*, p. 319.