PETTY NOTIONS, GRAND DESIGNS

If BARRY HUMPHRIES had set out in 1965 to come up with a satirical name for an Australian cultural commentator, it's hard to believe anything better than 'Bruce Petty' might have come to mind. It's almost too good as a shorthand label for the intelligentsia of Menzies' Australia, as seen from a disserter's perspective. Even the creator of Edna Everage (the average Melbourne housewife) and Sandy Stone (that decaying monolith of suburban contentment) may have had to reject the name as too obvious a caricature.

He would also have had to reject it because it was already being used by an Australian cartoonist who has devoted his life to proving that the naming gods have a perverse sense of irony. Petty's cartoons, animations and books have steadily sought to draw the big picture of our public life for more than four decades, and he has undermined our insularity wherever he has found it. He is the most analytical and least petty cartoonist we have.

In this piece, I focus on Petty's early years, until the major sea-change in his and Australia's career marked by the events of 1975. While I deal with images in approximately chronological order and gather some information about his life, this is not primarily a biographical sketch. It is Petty's engagement with public life and debate that I seek to outline, to describe his developing perspective on the issues of the 1960s and early 1970s.

1975 marks a turning point in Petty's career and attitudes. He identified strongly with a pair of projects that once ran along parallel lines: Gough Whitlam's plan to renovate Australia's social and political life, and Rupert Murdoch's desire to shake up the post-war political, media and business establishment in Australia and elsewhere. For Petty before 1975, the promise of a better and freer society lay in pursuing a project that had clear progressive goals and was gathering momentum; afterwards that promise lay in working out what has gone wrong.

FROM 1964 UNTIL mid-1975, there was no unmanageable tension between Petty and the editorial line of the Australian, because tomorrow seemed to belong to liberal-progressive social and economic policies: the Whitlam government brought in the Family Law Act and cut tariffs, and the Murdoch press was in favour of both. Moreover, the Australian was an experiment in starting a new, national, liberal broadsheet for the country so, under editors like Adrian Deamer (1969–71), it was a hornet of progressive opinion and experiment. When Murdoch and his papers turned on the Whitlam government and helped precipitate the constitutional crisis, many who had been with Murdoch for a decade or more had to choose a side. Petty was one of them.

So, while there are strong continuities in Petty's long argument with the nation's dreams and delusions, the split between his years spent at the Australian and those spent since 1976 at the Age is a real one; an attempt to map that second movement must be held over for another time. Here I will concentrate principally on Petty's editorial cartoons from newspapers and his own observations on his art. This leaves out a lot—the fifteen animated films, the five sculptures, the seven big books, the illustrations in others' books, the etchings, etc. He has lived long and kept at his work persistently. In this essay I'm only scratching the surface. It's not just his single life that matters. If you look at him and his works over the long haul, you get a witty and passionate view of Australia's public life in the second half of the twentieth century. He has been a long-distance idealist: in both senses of the word, it seems to me, Petty has lived and continues to live an exemplary life.
BEGINNINGS

Petty was a child of the Depression, born in 1929, the second of three children to Les and Minnie Petty. He grew up in Doncaster, on a fruit farm east of Melbourne that has long since been engulfed in suburbia. He was right near the front of the queue in the postwar generation—16 years old at the end of the Pacific War—that missed war service and entered adulthood during the gathering boom. “My job,” he wrote in 1994, are “those white Australians who had their chance in the 1960s and 1970s.” After a couple of years working on the farm, going to church and playing football, he turned his hand to illustration, first in a small advertising and animation firm called Owen Brothers in suburban Box Hill, then for Colorgravure in Melbourne “a Herald and Weekly Times publishing arm which did books.” In this first decade of drawing, he did plenty of commercial illustration to cover the costs of living, but he has never had any other sort of job since he left the farm: he has supported himself “by drawing throughout [his] adult life.” Though he enrolled from time to time in technical drawing and art school courses, he learnt most of his drawing craft on the job. He started out in something like the Smith’s Weekly style, with thick, sweeping lines in the ‘decorations’ to Fred Lord’s Look Who’s Talking for Colorgravure in 1953, but he rapidly developed his characteristic wispiness of line through the mid-1950s, influenced by the styles of Thurber, Ronald Searle, and especially Felix Topolski. At Colorgravure, he also contracted an interest in aesthetics and ideas from some of the other artists, who represented Melbourne bohemia of the early 1950s. He started to read and think about things that had not seemed relevant in the pragmatic world of the farm and his schooling, and he hasn’t ever stopped. Without the mixed blessing of a university education and the overconfidence it induced in some other members of the postwar intellectual generation, like Humphries, Greer, Hughes and James, he has developed a broad, inquisitive, and eclectic knowledge of the ways of the world.

More typical for a creative member of his generation, he made the pilgrimage to London in 1954, and enjoyed success there. He even attracted a warm introduction to his first book from Ronald Searle as that “rare” thing, a “promising young artist.” He made a living with commercial work and also sold comic illustrations to Punch and The New Yorker, like this one:

The style is recognisably that of the mature Petty—busy, sketchy, and detailed; intensely expressive, but not pretty; full of motion and incitement to thought; refreshingly lateral. What this picture lacks, compared with Petty’s later work, is a point. It’s a gag that, with appropriate modifications to the background architecture and physiognomy, could be made anywhere since the invention of the flower clock. Still, it was in London that Petty discovered politics: “[T]his was where a first whiff of politics happened. London in the 1950s. The Cold War. The end of the Suez Crisis, and Hungary. All of a sudden Britain wasn’t quite sure where it was”. Gags were no longer enough, so the expatriate genius plot changed. Dissatisfied with being a humourist of the generalised human condition, Petty returned to Australia in 1960, hoping to get a job as a political cartoonist.

This was no retreat to the provinces. He has drawn the world from Australia as if this were perfectly natural; unlike some who stayed in London or New York, he betrays absolutely no nostalgia for European or North American (call it metropolitan) richness of experience. He has spent the past four decades creating difficult and intelligent images to address the problems of the world from his spot on it. Nothing I have seen of his work since 1960 has been easy to look at, or entertaining in a simple sense. To the extent that it is occasionally beautiful, it is a difficult beauty, in which critical intelligence is never sacrificed to whimsy. For forty years he has been Australia’s most consistent and focused satirist, a patiently outraged moralist in ‘the lucky country’. Since 1963 he has been working on national newspapers—the Sydney Daily Mirror, 1963–4, the Canberra-then Sydney-based Australian 1964–76,
For forty years Petty has been Australia’s most consistent and focused satirist, a patiently outraged moralist in ‘the lucky country’. This asks to be read as well as viewed. You read it as a metaphor for complex cultural and political processes rather than as a comment on a particular event. Petty has always been at war with the tendency of the pictorial image towards stasis and order. His perspective comes from a fresh and disconcerting angle; sometimes from another planet. His deliberately casual line is what Brecht would call an alienation effect, or the Russian formalists de-familiarisation. Satirists have been doing it for millennia, trying to disrupt the rhetoric or imagery of normalised perception. Words, images, ways of viewing the world do political work by becoming automated, and that political work has a habit over time of becoming corrupt. The satirists’ aim is to jolt the audience (and by extension the public) out of automated assent to the activities of the knaves and fools who wield power.

The uncontroversial point here, before arguments about ideological content cloud the issue, is that power tends to mystify itself. Petty has throughout his career fought this mystification, and he shows a remarkable capacity not to flog dead horses. He never wasted much time on the residual power of the old establishment that melted away so suddenly after Menzies’ retirement. In the Australian’s very first issue (15 July 1964), commenting on Barry Goldwater’s accession to the Republican candidacy for President, he fixed his attention on the new imperial power rather than the Britain still often thought of as home in Menzies’ Australia. As early as 1966, he was attacking American cant in Vietnam:

and the Melbourne Age, 1976-present. He is acknowledged among his colleagues as an example and father figure to the generation of cartoonists who have ruled the editorial pages since the 1960s; Ann Turner tells me she chose a cartoon of his for the cover of her book of interviews with Australian cartoonists because she knew he was the only one that all the others would accept ahead of themselves. He is not the most popular cartoonist—no-one comes close to Michael Leunig for that honour—but he has a good claim to being the most influential over the long haul. And he is a satirist pre-eminent for his steady refusal to descend to the relative comfort of comic commentary on the events of the day. He is an eccentric but persistent analysis of the idiocies of Australian public life, a cartoonist who is always pushing against the tendency of his art to oversimplify issues.

Pettig has not deliberately followed a fashion since 1960. He has, however, managed often to be ahead of the times. Shortly after returning from the Old Country to (still officially) White Australia he left again in 1961 to visit the neighbours. Years before members of the English-speaking world became embroiled in the Vietnam War, he went to South East Asia, and the images of people and places in Australian Artists in South East Asia are remarkably (if not entirely) free of orientalisating tendencies. He also began to draw process rather than gags or tableaux:

Below: South-East Asian politics

Hearts and minds

... and we’re winning the hearts and minds of what’s left.
And in the eighties and nineties he attempted to draw money and global business, as they increasingly took over political processes as the real channels of power and corruption. My point is not that Petty has been uniquely perceptive about the flow of history. But he has nearly always been ahead of the pack, exposing Australian insularity and stupidity, prodding us towards wisdom. As far as is possible, given the constraints of the single frame on the editorial page and the need to fill it six times a week, he firmly resists the easy gags from the arsenal of political slapstick. And when they do appear, such gags are very rarely the sole point of a cartoon. This is how he described his business in 1986:

A cartoonist feels he can do little more than to query, to query institutions and attitudes that have already been established, to challenge people and their views and statements, to challenge these things as being fallible. In other words, it’s essentially a destructive kind of activity, and I suppose this is one reason why cartoonists are never completely delighted with what they’re doing. I think it’s still valid that this should go on, because particularly in this country there are so many institutions and statements made by people, and views held, which are never queried. We’re just not an inquisitive race any more, and it looks like we’re less and less likely to become inquisitive.

This is self-effacing—humility was considered a virtue when Petty was young, and is an ingrained habit—but it points to a mission that he has pursued tirelessly. Though a remarkably gentle, decent, and generous man in person, in his public role as satirical conscience for ‘the lucky country’ he has always pricked our complacency, and tried to make us a more inquisitive people. His contribution to our public sphere has been a militant and considered honesty that, viewed over time, gives a provocative image of Australian public life. As a body of work, it can be read as a Socratic commentary on that common life, as a gaudly annoying truth-telling. It is not unduly difficult to imagine a regime where Petty might have endured Socrates’ fate of execution for his persistent insolence towards authority; Suharto’s Indonesia would at least have silenced him for his persistent support of the East Timorese. Fortunately, for all its failings, Australia isn’t as bad as that.

**FROM MENZIES TO WHITLAM**

In any case politics is always absurd. There are always necessary contradictions between its public face and all the snarling and slobbering that goes on privately as politicians move from one fiasco to the next. There are periods when this is covered up. The time between Menzies and Whitlam was not one of those periods. Instead it was a time when people were encouraged to behold some of the follies of the carnival of politics.

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We all went to Canberra like a big wagon train. We were there to enlighten the world. I was pretty much allowed to choose what to draw, but it would be the story of the day or yesterday’s story. And in those years the stories were the most powerful that I have known. Australia joined the rest of the world. Asia was joining, but not on our terms. We each had to invent politics based on fairly random inputs and experience.

Independent thought and moral judgement were the things Petty wanted to see, not the half-smart cargo-cult mentality of going, in Holt’s lonesome memorable phrase, ‘all the way with LBJ’. The Liberal–Country Party Coalition struggled with the new world order, and seemed to be gradually losing the plot from almost the day after the resounding victory at the 1966 election. Even ministers like Paul...
Hasluck thought Australia ill-led: asked by his wife whether he might wish to lead after Holt's death, "I said that I did not want the prime ministership, had too little regard for many members of the Liberal Party to wish to lead them, and in any case, I had been 'embellished' so successfully by McMahon and undermined so much by Harold himself that I doubted anyone would want me." During the 1950s, Australian politics had often appeared to be quite a dignified business, but it was running ragged by the late 1960s. The social, party-political, and international contexts were all unstable and, for a left-wing cartoonist like Petty, it was a field day: the capacity to see a bigger picture than the mere events of the day is already apparent. This appeared four days before Apollo 11 lifted off for the first manned moon landing, successfully completed on July 20. It illustrates the binocular vision of the satirist: one eye on the public spin of the event, and another on the underlying political and economic structures that stop anyone from seriously considering an option like spending the money on alleviating poverty. Petty is exceedingly good at laying bare the nature of vested interests, and his villainously rapacious businessman is one of his most durable caricatures. It may be worth noting that these must logically be US businessmen (look at the skyscrapers outside the window, and consider whose space program it was anyway), but this is not a specifically anti-American cartoon. It is primarily as greedy businessmen blinded by self-interest that they are being attacked, not as representatives of American economic empire. Like the grinning generals pursuing death and destruction in many of the war cartoons, they are professionally deformed and willfully ignorant of the

The fan, 13 August 1971

There aren't many weeks in Canberra when you couldn't draw this cartoon, but the context of Coalition decay in 1971 was particularly pungent. This came at the end of a tragic face that might be called the Gortonerrution. On March 10, John Gorton had nobly resolved a tied vote on his leadership by making a casting vote against himself. McMahon was duly elected, then Gorton mischievously nominated for Deputy Prime Minister and "in an incredible rush of idiotic sentimentality his colleagues voted him in with a very handsome majority". This was never going to work, and after a few months of being steadily frozen out of the action by McMahon, Gorton decided to respond to Alan Reid's hostile account of his prime ministership in The Gorton Experiment. Instead of leaking denials through friends, Gorton contracted to write a series of articles about his government for the Sunday Australian. It was just the sort of uncalculating candour that had made his prime ministership so troubled. McMahon (an aficionado of the leak and a stranger to candour) insisted that the first article involved an open flouting of cabinet se-

Man on the moon, 10 July 1969

crecy, then took some days to check that he had the numbers to sack Gorton. Some hours after this cartoon appeared Gorton was sent into bitter exile on the back bench.

Petty's work in his years at the Australian contains much more than the mere comic commentary on the passing absurdities of politics and public life. The late 1960s was his period of confident opposition to the Vietnam War and the US alliance, to the sclerotic establishment, to world capitalism, to conservative social policies, to Australian insularity dressed up as self-satisfaction, to ascendant consumerism:
true implications of their conduct. Petty is not a 'faux pas' sort of cultural critic, certain that he sees plots and cover-ups and the deliberate abuse of power everywhere. He clearly believes in the basic goodwill of individuals to the extent that they would not normally harm others in cold-blooded malevolence. His targets are seldom conscious villains, and the purpose of cartoon after cartoon is to make people—both targets and audiences—think through the implications of plans and assumptions that they are falling into unreflectively.

For many baby boomers, Vietnam and the moratoria provided the crucible in which their world-views were formed. While Petty was not one of their generation, by more than a decade, he was one of the influences helping to form those views. He was in South East Asia drawing for his first book in 1961, the year the Kennedy administration started sending 'advisers' to Vietnam. Through his images, he became a prominent cultural commentator while Australia gradually left behind the Cold War conformities of the Menzies years, and took on a new set of anxieties. He was very early into the anti-war movement, and consistent in his moral view that the war was a crime against the Vietnamese. In cartoon after cartoon, he insisted provocatively on the full humanity of the Vietnamese. The 'Hearts and Minds' cartoon on page 28 illustrates this. The anti-war movement was getting going in 1966. But the war was still very popular, and Harold Holt's insistence that Australia would go 'all the way with LBJ' was rewarded by a record majority at the election. This cartoon lays bare the moral incompetence of a strategy that sought to protect a country from communist overthrow by barely discriminate slaughter of soldiers and civilians alike. Although the cartoon looks obviously and powerfully right in retrospect, at the time it must have looked more like treason. A month later, Petty was insisting on the validity of protest in a violent collage:

The scruffy 'rent-a-crowd' of long-haired women and bearded men depict the "violent, brawling crowd [which] howled down the Prime Minister, Mr Holt, for two hours last night in one of the ugliest Australian political meetings for years".17 However, they are there, being scruffy and unruly, for a powerful reason—the suffering mother and child placed, with the sudden immediacy of photography, in their midst. Are they merely a ratbag element, or are they right?

The Christian iconography implicit in the mother and child image (clearly Vietnamese people fleeing war, but also Mary and Jesus fleeing Herod) becomes powerfully explicit in the next one. This image must have been a disconcerting object of contemplation for many on Good Friday, 24 March 1967.

This is as visually simple as a Petty cartoon gets, but even it repays careful attention. Clearly it is Jesus as struggling Vietnamese humanity, carrying the burden of the cross to Calvary and execution. A secondary reading might be that this is Simon of Cyrene, a passer-by compelled to carry the cross for the flattering Jesus.18 That Simon is often depicted as having dark skin (though North African rather than Asian in appearance) in European art would add a racial charge to the cultural memory of some viewers, and may have been in Petty's artistic conscious or subconscious; at some level this is suffering Asian humanity bearing all our sins. However, the more important thing is to read the words of the collage cross in the context of the news of the day. The Australian editorial on the same page has two parts. The first is a sermon about the way Easter means less in Australia's increasingly secular and materialist society; this sits a little ironically beside the iconic

power of the cartoon. The second bemoans dimmed hopes for peace in Vietnam. The crosspiece is made of Johnson's words, and the upright is made of Ho's.

Though they have considerable conceptual and artistic depth, these last two images do not belong to the genre of the well-drawn cartoon—collage was a newish idea in cartoons at the time, and the bodies are ideograms of people rather than portraits or caricatures in Australia's long-established black-and-white tradition. Petty was a major influence in freeing up the 'look' of cartoons in the 1960s, and in focusing the viewer's attention on thinking through the complex issues of public policy more than on laughing at the passing parade of public foolishness. To draw the suffering Christ on the vias dolorosa as a Vietnamese weighed down by a cross of rhetoric is still shocking, and must have startled many a good Christian over breakfast at the time. In both these cartoons, the 'otherness' of the enemy, on which the rhetoric of war depends, is shattered. And the dignity on which political authority depends is hilariously attacked in this obscene comment on the weakness of Australian policy on Vietnam:

Whitlam had visited the People's Republic of China, a country whose government Australia did not recognise, as opposition leader in early July 1971. He had a prominent meeting with Premier Chou En-Lai, and gave clear indications that his future government would deal with the communists as the actual rulers of the world's most populous nation. This flew in the face of Cold War orthodoxy, and McMahon went on the air with a traditional Liberal Party red scare, of the kind that had been so successful for Menzies. I leave the rest of the story to a journalist who accompanied Whitlam on his Chinese tour.

At home, McMahon reacted instinctively... "We must not become the pawns of the giant Communist power in our region... Mr Chou had Mr Whitlam on a hook and he played him as a fisherman plays a trout." However, on 15 July, President Nixon announced that as a result of secret talks in Beijing he had accepted an invitation to visit China to establish a better US-China relationship. Kissinger had actually been in Beijing at the same time as Whitlam.

The Coalition government's most trusted ally, with whom they had gone to war in Vietnam, didn't think to warn them about this seismic change of policy. McMahon looked a desperate fool in his attempts to respond to this reversal and lost in a moment any hope of being able to trot out the hardy perennial of a 'Reds under the beds' scare in the election that had to come. Petty's cartoon says all this in four frames.
"A DIFFICULT TIME TO KNOW HOW RADICAL TO BE"  

The proverbial warning is that you should be careful what you pray for, because you might just get it. For many of the confident progressives of the 1960s, the Whitlam years were both exhilarating and confusing, and this was particularly the case for Petty. In 1972, the Australian barracked strongly for a change of government, and the Age in Melbourne did so more judiciously. The progressive forces in politics and culture knew that their chance was coming.

It is always a bit of a problem for a satirist to be on the winning side—in the great age of early eighteenth-century British satire, Swift, Pope, Gay, Fielding, and Hogarth thrived on opposition from and to the established regimes of Walpole and his successors, and they had artistic trouble on the odd occasion when they found themselves in sympathy with their rulers. So the victory of the Whitlam-led Labor Party in the 'It's Time' election of December 1972 presented difficulties of judgement that Petty had not yet been forced to face in his straightforwardly oppositional career. Fortuitously, Hazel De Berg interviewed Petty for the National Library of Australia's oral history collection on 1 December 1972, the day before the election was held. His sense of expectation is palpable in this interview, but the excitement is leavened with a degree of reserve. The principal reason for this, no doubt, was that he could not quite bring himself to believe that the first federal Labor victory in his adult life was really about to occur; and there is also the fact that being a cartoonist made him a professional sceptic. But, perhaps, there is also a deeper reserve about the capacity of Whitlam and his team to deliver. It is certainly possible to detect a pattern of hope tinged with doubt in this pair of cartoons from the campaign:

These cartoons ran on consecutive days after the official Labor and Liberal campaign launches; the gentleman with the G on his front is the often 'tired and emotional' DLP leader Vince Gair, whose campaign launch had played to very poor reviews. These are clearly partisan cartoons that seek to project a likely result. In the face of the challenge presented by Super Gough, McMahon and Gair are clearly gormless. And missing is the one Whitlam opponent who was hard to ridicule, the Country Party's capable and personable, smiling and ruthless Doug Anthony. His presence would have complicated the pro-Whitlam message of the cartoon, but I'm not sure that the message is entirely uncomplicated in the end. Perhaps hindsight is colouring my interpretation, but the Whitlam figure looks just a little over-stuffed and jowly to be the modern superhero. Though never petite, photographs of the time show Whitlam as a more stately figure than this, and it's tempting to see some satirical prescience about the softer and more indulgent elements of the Whitlam dream in this basically approving image. If I'm over-reading to find critical reserve in the campaign cartoon, its presence can hardly be denied in this cartoon from six months into the Whitlam era:

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
This cartoon is the first Petty drew after a three-week break, and is not tied to any specific political event. Instead, it is a summary of the new government's first few months, and is deeply and provocatively ambiguous. Is this disillusionment with the people who cannot see the significance of the issues, or with a government that has become so involved in its own manoeuvres that it has forgotten the electors? The cartoon can be read both ways. Its openness makes it better at instilling doubt in the reader; it is more provocatively honest than a straightforwardly preached message can be. This cartoon is not kicking a government when it was down: the loans affair and the various sackings that gave an air of chaos to the second Whitlam government were more than a year away at this point. Only Lionel Murphy's mad raid on ASIO had yet occurred, and the government was full of purpose, seeking to fulfill 'the mandate'. Given his convictions, Petty probably intended that the cartoon be read as a complaint that real changes were not happening fast enough. It can also be interpreted as presciently highlighting the fragility of the coalition between the ALP and middle Australia, or as hostilely pointing to the prospect of an activist government creating its own alternative reality. The crucial question is whether you read the middle class as right to be disengaged from the legislative and bureaucratic activity. Very probably Petty was sympathetic to the government rather than the overdressed and coddled middle class, but his cartoon is anything but dogmatic.

This is not to say that Petty maintained a scrupulous critical balance throughout the Whitlam years. Far from it. For example, he also had business to finish with Nixon as Vietnam wound up and Watergate reached its climax, which he executed vigorously:

-bearing the responsibility, 3 May 1973

Nixon had just made his last serious attempt to dodge responsibility for the Watergate cover-up by openly accepting responsibility and promising to clean it up. Petty had spotted the flaw in the logic, and was determined in this savage cartoon to sheet home the blame for a much greater crime.

Domestic politics rapidly became more complicated for him, because he identified strongly with the aims of a government that soon ran into various sorts of trouble. He even drew a logo for the ALP campaign in the 1974 double dissolution election forced by Billy Snedden, where an ALP government was narrowly returned.27 Generally, he tended not to attack the government as vigorously as he did the opposition. He drew Snedden as a diminutive fairy godmother (with tutu and wand) and then Malcolm Fraser as a long-drawn-out Dickensian figure of Dickenian gloom. By contrast, Whittam and his ministers generally appear human and dressed respectively in suits. Larry Pickering (then at the Sydney Morning Herald) shot to prominence depicting a comedy of errors marked by union thuggery and government incompetence. It was an easy, if hilarious, story to tell, and it suited the increasingly reactionary mood of the times. By contrast, Petty was disinclined to draw this government as a bunch of fools, so his cartoons sought a more complicated explanation for why things were not working out for the progressive party in power. Some then and since have taken solace in conspiracy theories about capital strikes and CIA interference, but Petty made a more disciplined effort to understand the new.

The big new thing was a recognition that the economy was really central and important, not something boffins tweaked to ensure that governments had the funds they desired to pursue their plans. Petty had always been interested in drawing the mechanisms that underlie human conduct, so economics had long been a theme in his cartooning. Now it became central:
If you had to choose one cartoon from anywhere to explain what went wrong with the Western economies in the early 1970s, this would be it. The long postwar boom was fragile for many reasons, but it was the leap in oil prices during 1973 that pushed it over the edge. It also injected petro-dollars into the game of global finance at exactly the time when the US seemed least capable of maintaining its leadership of the free-market world. It had not won the war in Vietnam, and it seemed incapable of maintaining Johnson’s vision of the Great Society. The dislocation was not as intense in Australia, but it was real enough, and the social-democratic hopes of Whitlamism were looking increasingly unachievable. Petty’s deepest wish was for a more equitable distribution of wealth, as this bitter cartoon shows:

Redistribution can’t weather the storm, 26 October 1974

In a spirit of hope, industry, unions and the public service had been sent by Gough to the water of wealth redistribution, but the gathering storm of the money crisis has sent them fearfully running back up the beach to cover. The partisan charge is increased by the fact that Snedden appears pleased to see the retreat, while Whitlam is clearly annoyed. The understated sadness of the cartoon intimates that greed and fear will win over hope and equity every time, that humans (or Australians and their institutions, anyway) are not courageous in the pursuit of ideals. This was the darkening theme of Petty’s cartooning as the events of 1975 flowed relentlessly towards the denouement of the constitutional crisis.

The hinge on which it all turned was the loans affair. The Labor government was already expansionary in its programs, but it needed a lot more money for the biggest dreamer of them all, Rex Connor. The traditional sources of capital in Europe and North America were drying up, so the government chased the new money in the world system to fulfill the desire of the Minerals and Energy Minister to guarantee Australian (and largely government) ownership of the country’s mineral wealth. This gave rise to a situation where it appeared that several people were supporting Australia’s desire to borrow up to $4000 million among the newly wealthy Middle-East money men. The constitutionality of the permission to seek loans was dubious—to avoid scrutiny in the Loans Council, the money was supposedly being borrowed “for temporary purposes”—and the intermediaries looked seedy: Mr Tifath Khamlani did not fit the general public’s image of a suited Anglo-Saxon banker. Consequently the loans affair did more to undermine public trust in the Whitlam government than anything else. At this distance, it is hard to know how seriously to take it. The money was pursued so incompetently that there was never any risk of a loan coming in, and a prudent government should have known that, but the actual risk to the nation’s finances was not great. It just wasn’t going to happen.

Whatever the fundamental rights and wrongs of the case, the Fraser-led opposition and the press were hysterical, especially in the Australian once Les Hollings had been installed as editor with a clear remit from Rupert Murdoch to push for a change of government. The editorials from this time suggest a very distinct change of tone towards the government from 12 June 1975. Before then, the editorial tone on the loans affair and sundry crises like the sackings of Crean, Cairns and Cameron had been critical but balanced. From June 12 onwards the balance disappears and a clear gap between the attitude of the editorial and the editorial cartoonist is evident. Petty tended to ignore the loans as much as possible, and sought to palliate the government’s responsibility when the topic could not be avoided:

Socialists giving capitalists a bad name, 5 July 1975

Overland 176 | 2004

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In the grand casino of capitalism, it's almost endearing that a nominally socialist government not be as good at the voracious game as the suited and bowler-hatted denizens of the market. And what is not in this cartoon is almost as important as what is. A week after the electoral disaster of the Bass by-election, where there was a 17 per cent swing to the Liberal candidate, there is little hint of domestic chaos for the government in the cartoon. At the very least, Petty is seeking to put the problems of the ALP government in a world context, and is perilously close to defending it.

The cartoons of this time are not uncritical of the government, but they are much more critical of the opposition. The sadness for the progressive cause that I noted in late 1974 develops into bemusement in this depiction of Whitlam and Rex Connor in the ruins of their policy of economic nationalism:

Connan and Whitlam in the ruins, 26 September 1975

Once Fraser elected to block supply in the Senate a note of despair enters Petty's cartooning. Have the hopes of a decade and the work of three years all been for nothing, asks this cartoon? Do Australians really want to return to a Menzian torpor?

Tunnel at the end of the light, 18 October 1975

Newspapers can tolerate a fair degree of diversity in the opinions they print, but there are such things as irreconcilable conflicts. This is what happened at the Australian in late 1975 when many journalists who had been proud to work at the new national paper felt betrayed by the paper's founder and his change of opinion. The large story of the events at the paper, leading to the journalists' strike in December, is told by Shawcross and Griffen-Foley. The drama can be seen in microcosm when this cartoon is compared with the way the Australian's editorialist greeted the Governor General's dismissal of Whitlam:

Sir John's decision gives the people a chance to speak. It brings us back to the basic issues. These are the state of the nation and the record of the government over the past three years... No Federal Government came to office with more goodwill than Mr Whitlam's; there have been few with such promise... small businesses are in dire straits and going bankrupt. The 25 per cent cut in tariffs has wreaked a cyclone through the car industry, shoe manufacturing and the clothing industry. Further, the ill-conceived plan to make the Public Service the pace setter in wages and shorter hours has sparked a wages explosion... It is a sad litany of malpractice, inadequacy and incompetence—albeit with some redeeming features. This record of the Government now becomes the issue before the people. Mr Whitlam has used every device available to him, and some that clearly were not legitimately available, to avoid a general election. He has failed. The rule of law has prevailed.29

Cartooning for a paper that was openly accused of editorial bias must have been complicated. Yet even in the frantic mood of the times, he continued to draw the big picture, including that other event of late 1975, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor:

Share, Australia, Share, 5 December 1975
Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au

This strong cartoon sponsors a dark thought: did it get into the paper more easily because it addresses domestic politics only glancingly and points to events that had not been dealt with well by the Whitlam government? Petty is true to long-term convictions on East Timor and South East Asia generally, but does this cartoon provide a convenient stick for the Australian’s new editorial line on domestic politics? It could be read as turning Whitlam’s dismissal line ‘Shame, Fraser, Shame’ back on himself; many on the left have thought that, on this topic, he deserved it.

Anyway, Petty did not last long at the Australian after the December 13 election. On 25 February 1976, ‘a special correspondent’ who was, in fact, Rupert Murdoch himself, broke the story of the Iraki (as they spelt it then) offer to pay USS$500,000 to the ALP for election costs, and called for Whitlam’s head on a platter. On 28 February the front page announced the arrival of Larry Pickering, “Australia’s top political cartoonist”. By all accounts, Petty was not sacked at this point, but he was clearly demoted for a cartoonist much more in tune with the paper’s new attitude; Pickering had even stood (unsuccesfully) as a candidate for the Liberals, in Fraser (ACT) at the 1974 election. People have told me that Petty and Pickering cartooned opposite each other for a while, but the microfilm tells another story: no Petty cartoon appears in the Australian after 28 February and he even goes unmentioned in a magazine piece called ‘Cartoonists are funny people’ by Rosalind Duna. The disappearance was sudden and coincided with both the employment of a right-wing cartoonist and Murdoch’s personal hatchet-job on Whitlam. There is no mention in the paper of Petty’s departure and I cannot get anyone to tell me whether the Australian silenced Petty or whether he withdrew his services. It is hard to believe that the parting was not acrimonious.

While the Australian was treating Petty as a non-person in 1976, Jonathan King thought him important enough to pen the foreword to his major anthology of Australian political cartoons, The Other Side of the Coin: A Cartoon History of Australia. The Foreword is a dyspeptic, even disillusioned take on the cartoonist’s role in Australia:

The Australian predilection for cartoons over its short history may be more accurately attributed to mental laziness rather than a special faculty of communication. Nevertheless mental laziness, if that can be sustained as an Australian characteristic, need not be the ultimate indictment. Like the search for the work proof vacuum cleaner, the search for mental short cuts produces some worthwhile ingenuity. We have now a unique version of history of Australian processes held together by the slender lines of cartoonists drawing for their respective generations over the years.

But the cartoon is an appalling abbreviation. Many times in the practice of producing a cartoon the decision at the deadline, lies between an accurate statement and an entertaining one. Entertainment usually prevails.82

This is bitter, but it has not been the end of the matter. While some have tried to live eternally in melancholy remembrance of the Whitlam years, Petty has always forged onwards into the coming world, even when it has not looked very alluring. What he had lost in 1976 was the absolute confidence that Australian people would rise to the challenge of equity, of social, economic, and international fairness. He has kept working towards this goal, but with a stronger sense of the seductive power of the forces arrayed on the other side.

He arrived at the Age in June 1976, still angry, but free again to vent his feelings in a paper of liberal tenor. Increasingly he drew multi-frame cartoons that depict the perversely complex economy and social processes, so this last cartoon can be seen to close his engagement with the Whitlam dream. It comes from the time of Whitlam’s retirement, after his humiliating defeat at Fraser’s hands in the 1977 election. It is both disillusioned and inclined to resume the battle for a richer life rather than greater riches:
This cartoon looks back to the lost hopes of the Whitlam era, but it also looks forward to the political world dominated by economics that has been the way for the past quarter century. Whitlam is a combination of Christ on Calvary and the Hunch- back of Notre Dame; a figure deserving tragic sympathy, but also definitively gone politically. In the multi-frame format that Petty favoured in this period, even greater complexity of argument is permitted, and here it is obvious that, while mourning moral loss is important, the urgent battle is to rise above the seduction of the man with the fistful of dollars. It is not at all clear that we are winning this battle yet, a quarter of a century later.

CONCLUSION

But that’s another story, for another place. Let’s finish instead with a reminder of the prophetic power good cartoons can accidentally wield. In researching this essay, the thing that has struck me most is how often Petty cartoons from the 1960s and 1970s could be reprinted in today’s paper. All you need to do is to digitally remaster the faces of the politicians, and reprint. Take a Vietnam cartoon with Holt and Hasluck going all the way with LBJ, for example, replace their faces with Howard, Downer and George W. Bush, and you have a vision that provokes thought about the war in Iraq. Downer is taller than Hasluck, so you might have to lengthen the legs there a bit. But the rest can stand.

In 1976 he may have felt that the inability of cartoons to pursue a sustained argument is a limitation, but the momentary access to a diverse audience permits a particularly valuable perspective. As he commented in a more recent interview:

[A] trap for cartoonists is to have a point of view and keep pushing it; people gradually qualify every drawing you do, discounting its message as being personal, idiosyncratic, rather than a universal sort of view that comes from, I don’t know where, outer space or wherever . . . the inspirational ones come from some weird sort of source.

When Petty calls out an image from the “weird sort of source” that lifts the audience out of the hurly-burly of the media sport of politics, it can, momentarily, reassess the shape of the world. Consider this one in the context of the War against Terror:

Only the names of the countries beneath the feet of Islam and the twentieth-century $ give the date away as the early 1970s. It’s not Petty’s fault that this cartoon still makes you think. It’s ours.
