



CARTOONS FOR THE CAUSE

CARTOONING FOR EQUALITY IN AUSTRALIA

by Marian Sawer

In February 2000 I noticed an advertisement headed 'Cartoonist needed'. This advertisement was placed by the Sex Discrimination Unit of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. They were seeking to commission cartoons for a new set of guidelines for employers on how to manage pregnancy in the workplace. This stimulated me to think how much government agencies in Australia in the last twenty years have relied on cartoonists to get their message across in a disarming but effective way. The use of cartoonists by government agencies with equity responsibilities seemed to be an interesting extension of the way graphic images have been used as part of the repertoire of social movements. The extent to which Australian social movements 'look to the state' has often been noted. In creating new government bodies, these movements have also imported some new forms of symbolic discourse into government communication.

That process of importation is dealt with in the latter part of this paper. However, my first concern is to outline the way in which nineteenth-century cartooning was almost uniformly hostile to women's rights, both in the United Kingdom and Australia and to show how themes common at that time continue in currency. I take as an example of this hostility the trope of the 'man in the apron', with us for over a hundred years. Suffragists themselves were regularly depicted in the English-speaking world as sharp-featured and short-sighted termagants. Wanting the vote made women vinegary and unattractive, while women who were not interested in the suffrage were depicted as rounded and buxom.



Punch magazine, whether in the UK or its colonial namesakes, promoted both visually and verbally the message that ‘women who wanted women’s rights also wanted women’s charms’ (Eveline & Booth 1999). Women then and now were sensitive to accusations they lacked womanliness or ‘femininity’; the suggestion that campaigning for equality made women sexually unattractive was a useful way of discouraging them from joining the cause. John Stuart Mill acknowledged the effectiveness of this tactic when he wrote of the value of countering it by having pretty women as suffrage lecturers. This he thought would help persuade young women that joining the suffrage movement would not unsex them or cost them a husband (Caine 1979: 64). The suggestion that equality seeking makes women unattractive is a hardy perennial and closely linked to another—the suggestion that women who take up the cause do so because they have failed to attract a man and want revenge.

In the United Kingdom, the protracted nature of the struggle led to the women’s suffrage movement appropriating the medium of their opponents and organising the production of pro-suffrage cartoons, for use as posters and postcards as well as in print media. In Australia the relatively early granting of women’s suffrage forestalled the development of a similar repertoire of social action. The arrival of women’s liberation at the beginning of the 1970s led, however, to the development of new symbolic vocabularies. These were taken by activists into government and their use to promote equal opportunity is the main subject of this paper.

The man in the apron

The supposed anarchic and subversive character of Australian cartooning in its golden age of the 1890s did not extend to challenges to male authority. This can easily be seen in the image repeated in political cartoons for over a century, of men being emasculated by women’s equality and forced to do the housework. This first image, from the *Bulletin* of 23 June 1894, is from the famous narrative cartoon by ‘Hop’ (Livingstone Hopkins) entitled ‘The Shrieking Sisterhood’. The cartoon depicts a Woman’s Christian Temperance Union delegation presenting the NSW Premier, Sir George Dibbs with a resolution on women’s suffrage. It is full of the anti-feminist stereotypes of the day, including a bespectacled harpy stabbing the Premier with her umbrella. The ‘womanly woman’ does not want political equality, not only because it will make her sharp-nosed and short-sighted, but because of its dreadful consequences for men, presented pictorially by the apron. Ninety years later, Elaine Nile’s supporters were still alluding to these consequences when they came to Canberra to protest against the Sex Discrimination Bill: One of their most prominent placards read ‘SEX BILL CASTRATES MEN’ (Sawyer & Groves 1994: p. 64).

The many images in the Hop cartoon include another staple—presentation of the women’s suffrage plank as a demand for trousers. He used this again on 24 November 1900, with NSW Premier Lyne offering a pair of trousers to the usual sharp-featured and bespectacled suffragist who is peering from around a dressing screen. He says ‘take them; but you must wear a petticoat over them.’ A later *Bulletin* cartoon of 1903 depicted a woman in knickerbockers (representing the Federal Women’s Political Association)

carrying aloft an Australian flag made into a pair of trousers. If the appearance of women in trousers was regarded as threatening, the dressing of male politicians in women’s clothes, a common trope then and now for cartoonists, was a common form of ridicule—a demeaning rather than a threatening image. The *Bulletin* (16 July 1892) dressed Sir Henry Parkes in a petticoat to deprecate his role in introducing the first women’s suffrage bill into the NSW Parliament. The bill had been introduced in 1890 and the catalyst for the cartoon was a woman’s suffrage meeting convened by the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union at which it was suggested Parkes should come back out of retirement.

Hop dressed Edmund Barton more than once as the midwife of federation, in one instance holding a black baby when Queensland finally voted to join the Federation (‘The latest addition to the family’, The *Bulletin* 9 September 1899). An early example of a cartoonist dressing a male politician in female clothes in order to ridicule them is a lithograph by HB (John Doyle) held in the National Portrait Gallery in London and dating from the struggle for the Reform Bill in 1831. Doyle dressed Wellington, the hero of the Battle of Waterloo, as an old woman in a frilled cap, ‘Dame Partington’, trying to hold back the ocean of reform with a mop.

Women’s political rights were construed not only as an attack on masculinity, but also as an attack on the basis of the social economy—the division of labour between paid work done by men and unpaid work done by women. The fear that if women were to obtain political equality they would no longer be prepared to do the housework had been around in Australia since at least the 1880s. Henrietta Dugdale had pointed out that the anti-suffrage argument that women would neglect their domestic duties if allowed into the public sphere really amounted to saying ‘If we acknowledge woman is human, we shall not get so much work out of her’ (1883, p. 67). The question of ‘who will cook the dinner and who will mind the baby’ hung over the whole suffrage campaign including the parliamentary debates. In Hop’s cartoon (as in



many others of the same period) the answer is clear—men will have to do housework. He emphasises the inappropriateness of this activity by giving the man the masculine accoutrements of a pipe and a smoking cap, as well as the demeaning apron and dishcloth. The man in the apron, the victim of women's political rights, had begun his long career in the media

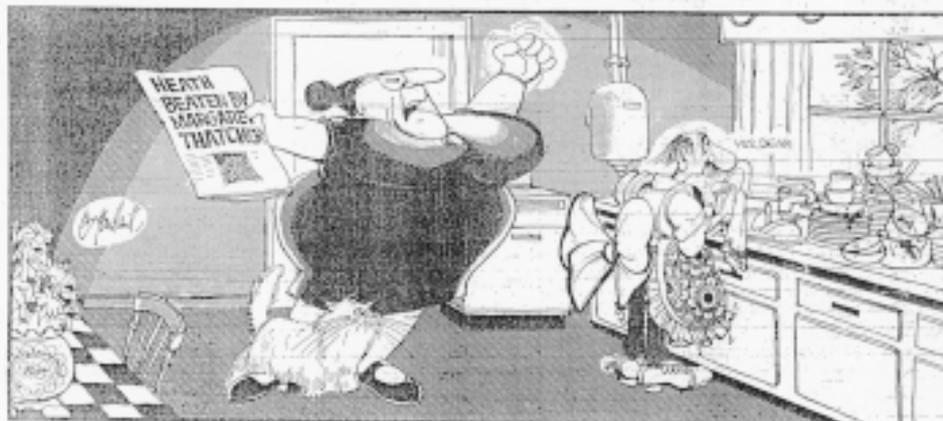
In the United Kingdom the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage commissioned John Hassall to design a poster in 1912 entitled 'A SUFFRAGETTE'S HOME'. Here the man has not acquired an apron and the poster is a call to arms to prevent any such possibility. The husband is standing indignant and with clenched fists after returning home to find his wife has neglected the house and abandoned the children to go out to a suffrage meeting. She has pinned a note saying 'Back in an hour or so' to a Votes for Women poster on the wall. His older child is weeping at a table, displaying holes in her stockings while a younger child is curled up on the floor with a jug next to him. The lamp is smoking because the suffragette has failed to trim the wick. The caption at the bottom exclaims AFTER A HARD DAY'S WORK! and urges readers to join the League (Atkinson 1997, p. 18).



A more recent example, by Langoulant, from the *Daily News* 6 February 1975, depicts the effects of Margaret Thatcher's win in the Conservative leadership ballot in the kitchens of the country. The woman swells up to twice her natural size, brandishing the news and announcing that 'At last women throw off the yoke of apron and tea towel and take their rightful place in the affairs of the world.' Her husband meanwhile has shrunk and his apron has acquired an enormous bow. Langoulant could have simply reproduced George Morrow's 1950 cartoon from *Punch*. This had depicted Boadicea, Queen of the Iceni, riding off in her chariot while her husband stood beside the house armed with a pot and dishcloth and with an apron tied over his Celtic costume (Atkinson, 1997, p. 24).

My last example is by Garrick Tremain and was published in the Christchurch paper, *The Press*,

LANGOULANT AND THE TORY-BALLOT



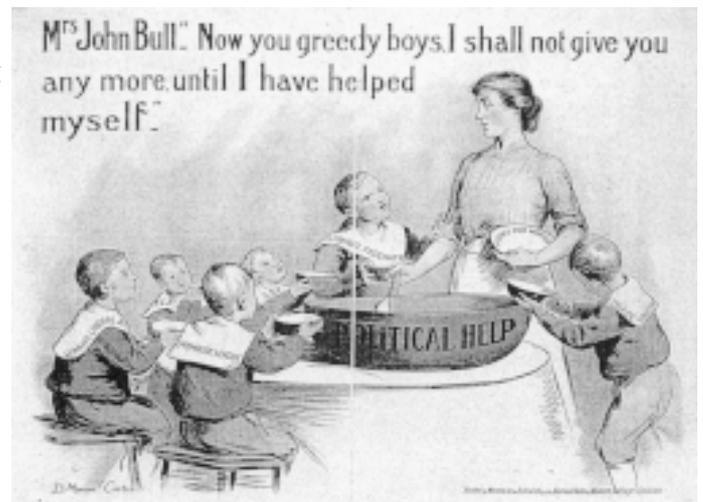
immediately following the election in 1999 of Helen Clark as Prime Minister of New Zealand. This time the man in the apron is her husband, Professor Peter Davis, relegated to the vacuuming by the fact that a woman can now be elected as Prime Minister (she is on the



phone refusing her defeated opponent, the former Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, a golden handshake).

Appropriating the language of the opposition

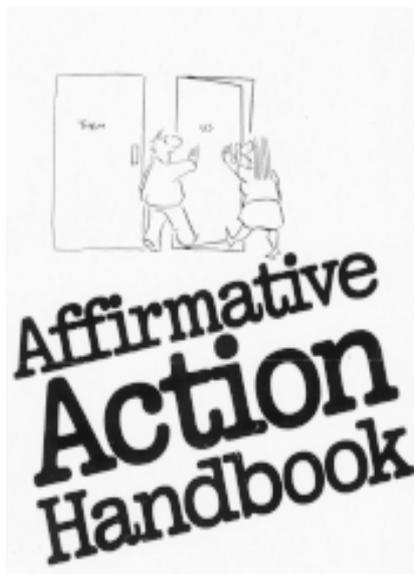
In response to the hostility of mainstream cartoonists, the different wings of the British suffrage movement created their own artist auxiliaries, or in the case of the Women's Social and Political Union, were served by individual artists such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Alfred Pearse. Sylvia Pankhurst had herself been greatly influenced by the socialist artist Walter Crane and his 'Cartoons for the Cause'. The Artists Suffrage League, on the other hand, was created in 1907 to assist Mrs Fawcett's National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). It organised competitions for poster designs, the first of which was won by Australian-born Dora Meeson for 'Political Help'. In her poster Mrs John Bull refuses to dish out any more political help to the clamorous male children clustering around the soup bowl until she has helped herself. The new mass-based political parties had created women's auxiliaries to assist with canvassing and fundraising, despite the fact that women were still voteless, and the children depicted here include the Women's Liberal Association and the (Conservative) Primrose League. (Lisa Tickner, 1987, provides a rich account of the visual strategies of the suffragists.)



Dora Meeson subsequently designed and painted the Commonwealth of Australia's banner, Trust the Women, Mother, As I have Done, that was carried in the huge NUWSS suffrage processions in 1908 and 1911. She was a member of the Women's Freedom League and married to Australian artist George Coates who joined the Men's League for Women's Suffrage in London.

Another organisation created to further the cause was the Suffrage Atelier, founded in London in 1909. It held meetings demonstrating methods of drawing suitable for reproduction as cartoons and posters and was active until 1914. It brought together

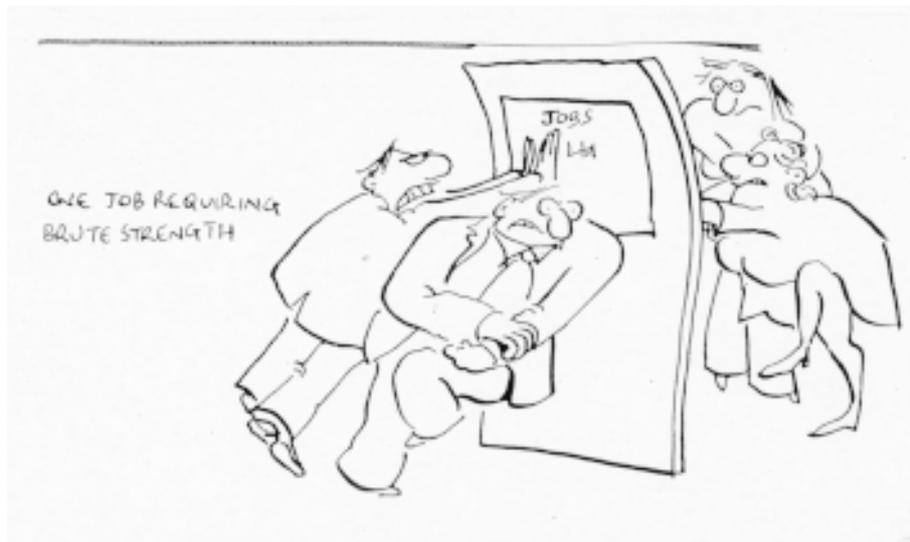
'suffragists whose object is to help any and every suffrage society through their art' (Atkinson 1997, p. 16). Their cartoons were reproduced as posters and postcards. They held up to ridicule the common arguments against women's suffrage, such as the 'prehistoric argument' that 'Women's proper sphere is the Cave' (a Catherine Courtauld cartoon of 1912). Another of their posters showed anti-suffragist magician conjuring up the 'Votes for Women Bogies' of 'petticoat government', 'the unwashed babe' and 'woman unsexed'. In 1912 the artist Louisa Jopling Rowe gave a speech on the value of pictorial art in political propaganda in which she stressed the great value of caricature and urged her colleagues 'to hold up to ridicule the Members of Parliament who think that women, having no sense of humour, cannot register votes' (quoted in Tickner 1987, *The Suffrage Atelier* was doing what feminist cartoonists have done ever since—wresting control so that the butt of the joke is no longer the woman, but rather the self-interested arguments used to keep women in their place).



The same reversal, making opposition to women's rights the butt of the cartoon is characteristic of the cartooning for equality of the 1980s. A pioneering example was the *Affirmative Action Handbook* (1980, 1983) published by the Review of NSW Government Administration. It relied heavily for its message on the Patrick Cook cartoons that enlivened its pages and mocked the fears surrounding equal opportunity. The inclusive feel of this publication is signalled by the frontispiece, whereby a man and a woman are avoiding the door marked 'Them' and both entering, somewhat apprehensively, the door marked 'Us'. The lack of women's toilets remained an excuse for not employing women well into the 1980s and was a useful symbol for cartoonists. The other Cook cartoons

all serve to defuse standard arguments against equal opportunity, with the 'one job requiring brute strength' being bracing the door against women trying to enter. He also anticipates the bogey of 'thought police', preventing harassment in the workplace. Cook's pinstriped inspector with the briefcase labelled 'niceness police' is stationed in a foyer, forcing male and female employees to smile at each other as they pass.





Peter Wilenski had already commissioned Patrick Cook to illustrate the *Interim Report* of the Review of NSW Government Administration (*Directions for Change* 1977) and in particular to depict attitudinal barriers to change.

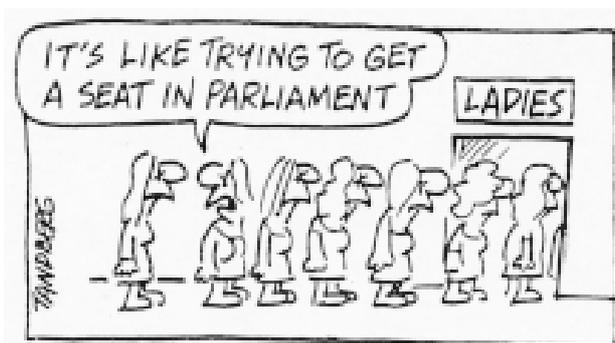
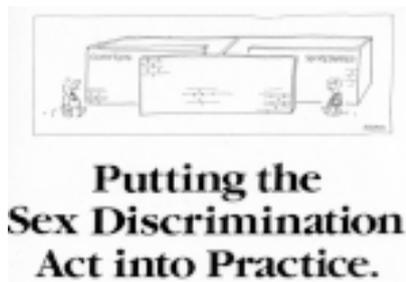
Patrick Cook again provided the illustrations for the *Further Report* of the Review (*Unfinished Agenda* 1982). When I was reviewing the employment of women at the Australian National University in 1983 I was moved to reproduce the prophetic figure (p.60) announcing 'The Road to Hell is Paved with Referrals to Committee'. Wilenski was an innovator across many areas of public administration and the use of cartooning to promote an equity agenda seems to have yet another of his many contributions. Australia did a lot of policy borrowing from Canada in the area of equal employment opportunity, but the use of cartooning was not something borrowed from Canada..



At the time of the stormy passage of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* Ron Tandberg was one of the cartoonists who provided the most incisive support for equal opportunity. His work was highly prized by equal opportunity practitioners and in 1989 two of his cartoons were used to illustrate the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, to try to neutralise the anticipated opposition to multiculturalism. Not surprisingly Tandberg was also chosen to illustrate the brochure *Putting the Sex Discrimination Act into Practice* (Human Rights Commission 1984). His toilets cartoon was reproduced on the front cover.

While Patrick Cook's cartoon for the front of the Affirmative Action Handbook had 'us' and 'them' toilets, Tandberg has a male toilet designated 'scientists' and female one designated 'secretaries'.

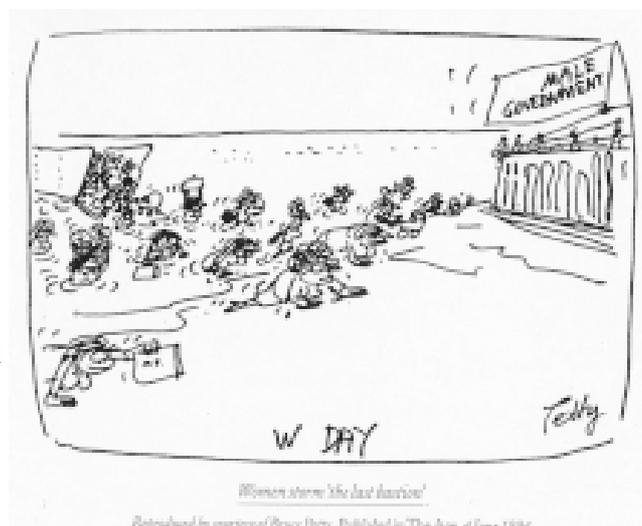
Another much reproduced pocket cartoon by Tandberg is of male executives complaining to toddlers 'How can we be competitive if we have to look after you?' This brings together, and hence problematises, discriminatory assumptions such as that men do better because they are more competitive and that there is someone available at home to take care of family responsibilities for them. Other Tandberg cartoons that work this way, by juxtaposing assumptions, include the frazzled women telling her husband glued to the television set: 'You'll live longer if you do the dishes!' This brings together the statistics concerning the distribution of unpaid work with the continuing longevity gap between men and women.



Yet another example is the woman queuing up for the 'ladies' commenting 'It's like trying to get a seat in parliament'. This juxtaposes the well-known under-provision of women's toilets in public buildings with the queuing effect caused by the limited number of parliamentary seats earmarked for women. For example, the Liberal Party in Victoria always set aside one Senate seat for a woman from its formation —

originally held by Senator Ivy Wedgwood, and then by Senators Margaret Guilfoyle and Kay Patterson, with some other women representing Victoria on a more short-term basis. There has been a similar phenomenon in relation to federal Cabinets since 1975, with one seat being earmarked for a woman and only minor deviations from this.

Jenny Coopes also addresses the limited opportunities that have been made available to women in politics, in a cartoon first published in the *Sun-Herald* (4 September 1994) and reproduced, for example, in Margaret Reynolds' *The Last Bastion* (1995, p.129) and elsewhere. Senator Reynolds' book was published not long after the Labor Party adopted quotas and was primarily directed at the Labor Party, with the help of a foreword by the Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating.



Reproduced by courtesy of Bruce Percy. Published in *The Age*, 4 June 1994

The book took its title from a cartoon by Bruce Petty depicting 'W DAY' with women pouring out of a landing craft armed with brief cases and storming the last bastion (parliament house).



Cartooning was used in the 1990s not only to ridicule the sexism of political parties, but also to inspire women to aim for political careers. The Office of the Status of Women commissioned Judy Horacek to do the cartoons for *Every Woman's Guide to Getting into Politics* (Tully 1995,1996). They are the making of the Handbook and have been much reproduced, including the black woman who is told by an image consultant that what she looks good in is authority. In this article I am applying a self-denying ordinance concerning Horacek's work in promoting equal opportunity, in deference to her own writing on the subject (Horacek 2000).



The Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Bureau of the Australian Public Service Board, which started life in 1975 as a result of the evidence provided to the Coombs Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration, was another government agency anxious to get its message across through humour. It plundered the Patrick Cook cartoons from the *Affirmative Action Handbook* for its publications, as well conscripting other cartoonists, including Gaynor Cardew. Even after the abolition of the Public Service Board, the remnant EEO Unit was still using Cardew to provide memorable images for its 1990 Guide for Managers entitled 'The Equal Kit'.

Cardew, who died in 1999, was the feminist cartoonist whose work was most often used by federal

government agencies in the 1980s and 1990s. She began the 1980s with work for the International Year of the Disabled. She then did work for the Affirmative Action Resource Unit in the Office of the Status of Women, illustrating the pamphlets put out to calm fears about affirmative action. She worked most continuously, however for the Women's Bureau in the Department of Employment, Education and Training, illustrating their Newsletter *Women and Work* from 1987 until the Women's Bureau was 'mainstreamed' (abolished) in 1997.

The Women's Bureau dated back to 1963, but it fell victim to the Howard government's hostility to 'special interests' such as those supposedly represented by equity agencies. Cardew was the first cartoonist regularly commissioned by the Women's Bureau. Previously they had reproduced cartoons done for union equal opportunity publications by Helga Binder, Mary Leunig, Jenny Coopes and others. Cardew, however, came to epitomise the feisty spirit that led the Women's Bureau to be described as a guerilla unit operating deep within the employment department. Her cartoons for the second-last issue of *Women and Work* included a defiant one showing an education siege tower supposedly being dragged in the direction of EEO but with an on-looker commenting: 'You know, I could almost swear it's moving backwards'.





Cardew had also been commissioned by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) to illustrate publications including 'Your Rights at Work' and the *Equal Pay Handbook* (1998). They both had memorable images attacking common prejudices and suggesting some responses such as: 'If you pay your female workers less, then as a female client I pay less yes?' One important thing about these cartoons in government publications is the traditional licence allowed cartoonists; messages that cannot be transmitted through the cautious and legally circumscribed medium of prose can be both visually and verbally telegraphed through the cartoon. HREOC, like other equity agencies targeting youth audiences has also used Streetwise Comix, for example to send playground messages about sexual harassment.



Meanwhile the Office of Status of Women in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet was commissioning another feminist cartoonist, Jenny Coopes, to promote the findings of the 1987 Pilot Time-Use Survey. The survey found that women did about 70% of the unpaid work performed in Australia—on average about 36 hours a week, while men did on average about 18 1/2 hours, regardless of how many hours of paid work their wives performed. Coopes illustrated each of the major findings in the popular version of the secondary analysis of the survey data. One of the most reproduced of these cartoons illustrated the finding that when a woman gets married she increases her unpaid work by almost 60%. Coopes has the bridegroom saying 'I do' and the bride saying '...but I'll do more!' (Office of the Status of Women 1991: p. 14).

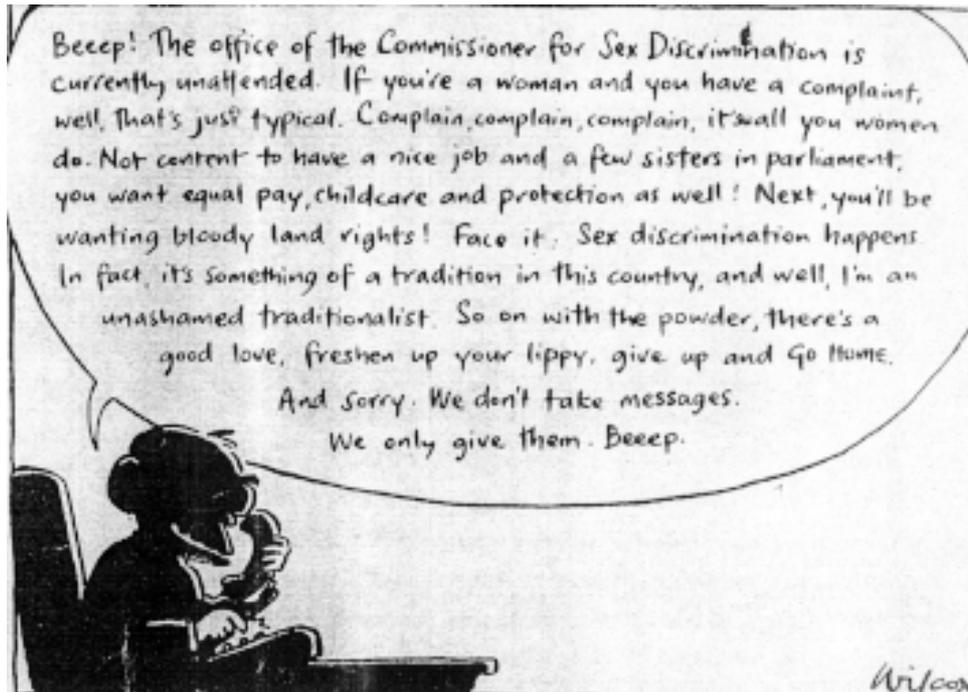
While all these powerful cartoons were being produced, either spontaneously or commissioned for equal opportunity publications, some observers were not impressed. I was astonished to read a piece by Peter Coleman (1996) suggesting that there had been a great revival of Australian cartooning between 1960 and 1975 which was brought to an end in the late 1970s by the onset of political correctness. Coleman lamented that there was a narrowing of focus, no more Aboriginal or Jewish jokes or jokes about English immigrants or Japanese, Chinese or Arabs and no more homosexual jokes. This is odd as there have been more cartoons about Aboriginal issues in the 1990s than any other period I can think of. Coleman means, perhaps, the disappearance of cartoons in which these groups are the butt of the joke. He claims 'If it were only a matter of silencing the voices of hate or bigotry that would be fine. But it also often silenced the voice of humour itself...' (p. 13). For him, cartoonists had become ideologues rather than jokers.

Personally I don't find the golden age of Australian cartooning, when women (interestingly Coleman does not even mention the misogyny of classical Australian cartooning) and Aborigines and Chinamen were usually the butt of the joke, very amusing. Geoff Pryor, editorial cartoonist for the *Canberra Times* has recently (6 September 2001) used the racism of nineteenth-century cartoonists as a vehicle for critique of current racial politics. Under the title 'Recycling', he reproduced the famous 'Mongolian octopus' cartoon by Phil May, first published in the *Bulletin* in 1886. Pryor annotated the cartoon, suggesting the addition of a turban and other features to turn the Chinese menace into an Islamic one.

I think that in the last couple of decades we have had an interesting period in which cartoonists' ability to demolish hypocrisy and self interest has been used very effectively to promote a 'fair go'. This is in part a tribute to the quality of Australian cartooning, in part a tribute to those who have seen how important cartooning might be in the political repertoire of equality seeking groups. This has carried over into government and government agencies with equality mandates. In this country such agencies have been much more inclined than elsewhere to draw on the subversive power of visual humour to promote their message, otherwise often in danger of disappearing under government speak. Unfortunately some of the agencies which were foremost promoters of cartooning for equal opportunity, like the Women's Bureau, no longer exist. Cartoonists can draw attention to this kind of erosion, like the Cathy Wilcox editorial cartoon (Age 19 September 1997) which helped ensure that the Howard government finally made an appointment to the vacant position of Sex Discrimination Commissioner in 1997.

When government agencies charged with protection of human rights or promotion of equity are closed down or muzzled, the role of cartoonists outside government becomes even more important. As government has become more conservative, it has become more nervous about the transgressive character of cartooning as a form of official communication. Editorial and free-lance cartooning (most feminist cartoonists are in the latter category) has itself become a 'last bastion' of equal opportunity and social justice agendas.

* My thanks to Peter McCarthy for his editorial suggestions and Darren Boyd of Coombs Photography.



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