

# Best Australian Political Cartoons 2005

**Russ Radcliffe (Editor)**

**Reviewed by Neil James**

At first glance you might be wondering why a book of political cartoons is being reviewed in *Defender*. The answer is a function of form, history and statistics. Of the 183 cartoons by 29 cartoonists featured, some 102 depict national security or related issues, including defence and warfare (25), foreign affairs (29), terrorism (25) and border security (23).

Cartooning has also been long embedded in Australian military culture. The *ANZAC Book* produced in 1915 by the veterans of Gallipoli included numerous cartoons. The extensive works of Captain Bruce Bairnsfather illustrating life in the Western Front's trenches are justly famous. In World War II popular cartoon strips like *Bluey and Curley* were encouraged to maintain morale and a sense of home and perspective. There would not be an ADF unit anywhere in Australia or overseas today without at least one topical cartoon prominently displayed. Many are the units with feature walls of cartoons, often with examples stretching back years.

The cartoonist and the sailor, soldier or aircraftman share a common urge to recognise, celebrate and even relish absurdity. Cartoonists are motivated by a range of factors, including the desire to summarise through caricature the complex issues of the day. For military personnel, appreciation of the cartoonist's art lies chiefly in traditional digger humour in adversity. Both groups also share a common interest in deflating authority, especially where it is perceived to involve pomposity, hypocrisy or deceit.

This is the third annual compilation of Australian political cartooning edited by Russ Radcliffe (the commissioning editor at Scribe Publications) and probably the best yet. For one thing, there is no foreword by Phillip Adams this year. For another, 2005 produced plenty of superb cartooning fodder, including the aftermath of a federal election, the resignation of Mark Latham, tsunamis, hurricanes, terrorist bombings, the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and assorted political and bureaucratic scandals. As might be expected, the collection opens and closes with episodes depicting the Latham saga, with 14 interpretations of his fall from the Labor parliamentary leadership in January and seven covering his diaries published later in the year.

What is included or excluded from any compilation is essentially dependent on the opinions, judgements and tastes of the editor. A variety of contractual, copyright and availability reasons also limit the choice. This said, there are some notable omissions of both cartoonists and compelling cartoons. Colin Wicking of Darwin's *Northern Territory News*, the wielder of a particularly sharp pen in the illustration of human foibles, is unfortunately not included. This is a pity as Wicking is one of the very few newspaper cartoonists to truly savage both sides of politics equally, and is also well

known for his chiding of hypocrisy among social and ethnic groups normally treated with undeserved respect by cartoonists elsewhere.

Rod Clement from the *Australian Financial Review* is also not included, even though he was one of the three finalists for the 2005 Walkley Award for cartooning. Who

can forget this penetrating cartoon of two children in an immigration detention centre with one remarking, 'You still going to be a deterrent when you grow up?' While Peter Nicholson from the *Australian* is represented by eight cartoons, his very clever and well-deserved Walkley finalist entry, 'The Long Walk', on the subject of ex-Essendon Aboriginal footballer Michael Long arriving at the PM's office, is sadly missing. Of the three finalists in the 2005 Walkley Award for cartooning, only the eventual winner, Andrew Dyson of *The Age*, has his entry included.

Eric Lobbecke from News Limited has only one entry. Surprisingly not featured is his stark cartoon from the *Australian*, on the April 2005 Sea King helicopter crash in Nias, which won him the 2005 Walkley Award for Artwork (and which by sheer coincidence accompanied an ADA opinion article). Perhaps it was not judged a sufficiently 'political' cartoon.

The cartoonist with most entries in the book is Bill Leak from the *Australian* with 21. Geoff Pryor from the *Canberra Times* is second with 17. Both sides of Australian politics get a fair caning throughout, as do George Bush and the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. The 25 cartoons on military and related topics are a mixed bag. Both Bruce Petty and Peter Nicholson, for example, make great fun of the decision to extend the employment of women in combat roles but distinctly misunderstand the actual key issue involved (women were already in the 'frontline'). Ron Tandberg's efforts tend to go a step further and are usually more polemical than perceptive. Geoff Pryor is consistently incisive (and to a military audience the most artistically accurate in the details) and at least tries to be even-handed in who he guts with his pen.

The award-winning Lobbecke cartoon cited above is a particularly good example of the compelling power of a cartoon. His brilliantly executed depiction of a Sea King helicopter, as a dinosaur skeleton hanging in a museum, struck home across the country – painfully so in parts of the ADF. Some even read the image as depicting a monster devouring its own. Most critics of the accompanying opinion article appeared to be motivated more by Lobbecke's imagery than any substantial disagreement with the argument it accompanied. Such is the effect and attraction of cartooning in a military setting. ♦

*Russ Radcliffe (Ed), 'Best Australian Political Cartoons 2005', Scribe, Melbourne, 2005, Softback, 186pp., RRP \$A27.95.*

