

The Gillies Report and unsustainable political satire

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In a 1998 radio program charting the decline of political satire in Australia, Ian Simmons, head-writer for *Good News Week*, agreed (in keeping with the general tenor of discussion more broadly) that the 'problem' with political satire was generational:

I remember watching Gillies ... and being really inspired by it ... Yes, I think different generations seem to be coming from a different place. What's the great political event that happened in Australia after 1975? ... Maybe that's where the satire generation came from ('Beyond a Joke' 1998).

According to this point of view, the post-Whitlam generation is not sufficiently politicised to produce or appreciate political satire. This is a commonly held opinion, but unexpectedly promoted by someone writing politically satirical material for a TV program aimed directly at the supposedly 'post-satire' generation. In fact, Simmons' comments reveal the way that *The Gillies Report* (1984-5) has been used to define the parameters of political satire on television.¹ Despite Max Gillies' own generous support and enthusiasm for the next generation of politically motivated comedians, his work on *The Gillies Report* has become representative of a particular set of expectations about political satire and the audience for



this kind of comedy. In the following discussion, I will be revisiting this iconic program to track the nature of its impact at the time of its broadcast, and its subsequent role as a gauge of satirical authenticity.

The Gillies Report was loosely formulated in the mode of a TV current affairs show, a conceit that was used to make a connection with the evolving political scene and to allow some media parody. (The show also included some fairly straightforward sketch comedy.) The launch of the show serendipitously coincided with a ‘snap’ Federal election, giving caricaturist Max Gillies ample opportunity to take on the two colourful party leaders of the time: Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Leader of the Opposition, Andrew Peacock. With the incumbent Hawke Government still riding high on the wave of popular sentiment that had brought it to power in 1983, the election result was a foregone conclusion. There was a certain amount of grumbling in the news media about the uneventfulness of the campaign, an opinion also shared by Gillies who heralded the release of the findings of the Costigan Royal Commission as the ‘first exciting thing for weeks’ (Lewes 1984, p. 65). Yet however predictable the outcome of the election may have been, the contrast between Hawke’s smug popularism and the privileged Peacock’s incapacity to connect with the voting public proved satirical gold for Gillies.

Patrick Cook, who both wrote for and performed in *The Gillies Report*, has subsequently described the show’s satire as ‘full-blooded’, as well as declaring the ABC to be the only network where such incisive work could be done (Bramwell & Matthews 1992, p. 218). By the same token, when publicising *The Gillies Report* at the time of its launch, Cook emphasised the show’s role in unshackling the ABC from a history of political timidity where ‘the ABC had gone as far as starting such series in the past but [dropping them] when executives began “pooing themselves” over possible political fallout’ (Kissane 1984, p. 29). Most notoriously, in the early seventies a fearful Aunty had, at the eleventh hour, pulled the



plug on the political sitcom *Our Man in Canberra* (Inglis 1983, pp. 294-295; Storey 2005). The ABC's *This Day Tonight* had been an instance of fearless and risky political commentary during this period but, as Graeme Turner has pointed out, it was a constant thorn in the side of ABC management (2005, p. 37). However, in the wake of the Dix Report and the reconfiguration in 1983 of the ABC as a Corporation with the remit of being 'informative, entertaining and innovative' (Inglis 1983, p. 436), as opposed to the previous 'adequate and comprehensive', *The Gillies Report* was precisely what ABC television needed to boost its image. The show provided the ABC with an opportunity to market its newly fledged corporate self as bold, classy and independent.

The establishment of a Comedy Unit in Melbourne had been an attempt on the part of the ABC to recover some of the energy and innovation that had characterised its television comedy in the first half of the seventies (Bye, Collins & Turnbull 2007). The irreverent sketch comedy show, *Australia You're Standing in It* (1983-1984), was the unit's first production and was soon followed by *The Gillies Report*. When Rod Quantock reminisced some years later to Murray Bramwell about his experience of making *Australia You're Standing in It* with the ABC, he described a management made nervous by the novelty of the material and the structure of the show: 'We went into an institution that didn't have much idea' (Quantock in Bramwell & Matthews 1992, p. 94). In the event, hesitation at an executive level led to a turn-around time that was so drawn out they had had to dump their specifically political material and go for 'something more timeless' (Quantock.).² Only a year later, the Gillies team had a different experience, thanks in good measure to the trail blazed by the earlier show.³ Perhaps too, the comparatively free rein given to *The Gillies Report* was evidence of the 'new' ABC's quest for relevance under the conflict-ridden leadership of the inaugural managing director, Geoffrey Whitehead, who bravely declared to Lyndall Crisp of the *National Times*, 'We are going to dare to fail ... we're going to allow people to test themselves against the best of them' (1984, p. 6).



In making this declaration, Whitehead was undoubtedly determined to separate the 'new' ABC from the faded 'Aunty' described in 1980 as being 'set solid in apathy while they wait for their Godot, Alexander Dix, to finish his inquiry' (Age 5 December 1980, quoted by Inglis 1983, p. 438). In this respect *The Gillies Report* was manna from heaven for the ABC. The show could be wholehearted in its treatment of politics (both secular and religious) and of contentious issues such as abortion and AIDS, because it dealt its blows from within the sanctioned satirical tradition of political caricature.⁴ Just as newspaper cartoonists have generally been granted a licence that is rarely extended to any other area of the newspaper, *The Gillies Report* had a similarly hermetic status. As Manning and Phiddian have commented, 'Cartoonists are not journalists, and ... should be accorded extra licence to be extravagant and even unfair in their criticisms of public life' (2004, p. 34). From within this framework, the free rein given to *The Gillies Report* in the lead-up to the 1984 election was in direct contrast to the ABC's institution of a 'watch-dog election committee' (Crisp 1984, p. 6) in response to criticisms from the Hawke Government about the ABC's 'left-wing' bias. According to Whitehead, the committee was to work as a 'lightning conductor' to take the pressure off individual journalists to respond to complaints (Crisp). Nevertheless, the presence of this committee demonstrates the quite particular place *The Gillies Report* occupied in the ABC landscape. The show was a space where the ABC could take risks with relative impunity.

Yet, in keeping with the almost quintessentially conflicted nature of the ABC, ABC management was by no means unanimous in its decision to launch *The Gillies Report* in the midst of an election campaign. In fact, upon being sacked from his role as director of television in 1986, Richard Thomas boasted of his courage in recommending, after taking 'a lot of advice', that the show go ahead. He was told that he would 'burn for this', but had 'felt it was an important part of the democratic process. And in the end it caused virtually no flak at all' (Williams 1986, p. 24). The only sensation had nothing to do with the election and involved Kerry Packer's fury at his depiction as the tax-evading Goanna.



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Despite management hesitation the ABC marketed *The Gillies Report* on its capacity to offend, parodying the dreary imperative that the national broadcaster should be fair-minded and neutral at all costs: 'The ABC denies all responsibility for opinions expressed in this series'.⁵ The show offered the newly instituted Corporation a more robust way of responding to criticism about its lack of direction than the controversial newspaper advertising campaign that was launched around the same time.⁶ With the travails of the ABC in mind, *Sydney Morning Herald* TV critic Richard Coleman, commented that 'Max Gillies has done for the ABC exactly what Patrick Cook did for so many years for *The Financial Review*: he's made it bearable' (1984, p. 38).

The Gillies Report is best remembered for Gillies' incisive portrayal of Bob Hawke. Despite the security of his position at the time, Hawke was said to be "quietly furious" about the ABC and its alleged left-wing bias' (Crisp 1984, p. 6), so Gillies' unremitting scrutiny was cheeky to say the least. In their representation of Hawke, Gillies and his team represented the Prime Minister's vanity and self-importance as a public performance of confidence that sought to repress an anxious insecurity. Hawke's dislike of Gillies' portrayal has been much documented⁷ but, unlike an unsympathetic *Four Corners* report on the government's uranium policy (Inglis 2006, p. 56), Gillies' satirical work occupied a protected space. Moreover, the Gillies team was fairly wide-ranging and non-partisan in its observation of the absurdities and iniquities of the political landscape of the eighties. There is no doubt, however, that Gillies' Hawke touched a particular chord with audiences. In part, Gillies provided a satisfying check to Hawke's celebrated charisma, but the enthusiasm for Gillies' Hawke also connected up with and extended the Prime Minister's popularity. Subsequent commentary has averred that Gillies, in keeping with the satirical enterprise of ridiculing folly, 'prick[ed] the Labor leader's charismatic bubble' (*Hobart Mercury* 3 November 2006, p. 36). Yet, however unhappy Hawke may have been about Gillies' incisive portrayal, the performative, histrionic nature of Hawke's execution of the role of Prime Minister was an



integral part of his public image, as he happily teetered on the brink of absurdity in his effort to be the Aussie larrikin so loved by the punters. It would have been hard for the Gillies team to imagine anything sillier than Hawke's appearance on the popular music show *Countdown* in a cowboy hat that matched the one regularly worn by host Ian Meldrum.⁸

In lamenting the comparative dearth of political satire in Australian cultural expression, Nick Richardson has emphasised the necessarily persuasive nature of this form of intervention, commenting that 'there is a touch of the propagandist about the political satirist' (2000, p. 7). On the other hand, Guy Jenkin, a writer of political satire for British TV, is adamant that: 'if you want to change the world, don't write satire. Become a politician, become a terrorist, or whatever ...' (Keighron 1998, p. 137). Yet, while the creators of *The Gillies Report* have always steered clear of claiming any persuasive force for their work, their place at the forefront of TV's satirical pantheon is often constructed as a kind of activism. Fellow satirist Mary Kenneally (famous for her portrayal of the pretentious 'Debbie') is instinctively certain that the 'ridicule' meted out to Hawke must have had a 'huge effect' and that 'it put Bob Hawke on the back foot for quite a while' ('The State of Comedy in Australia', 1997). In a similar vein, Bob Ellis has commented that what Gillies 'did with Hawke changed history because he showed Hawke's deviousness at a time when people believed Hawke was straightforward' ('Max Gillies Profile', 2002).

However, while the Hawke Government may have had a decline in popularity during his tenure, Hawke was never voted out of office but was ousted in a leadership challenge at the end of 1991. Surely, there is a determined wishfulness in Kenneally and Ellis's commentary, as they demonstrate their own desire that the scrutiny provided by the Gillies team was able to make a difference. Don Watson, a key member of *The Gillies Report* writing team, has never been convinced that the show's satire had any opinion-changing impact. Of Gillies' portrayal of Bob Hawke, Watson commented that despite



distinguished, influential people saying that Max's characterisation of Hawke was so devastating it would bring him down ... The louder they laughed the more they voted for him. ('The State of Comedy in Australia', 1997)

Gillies has consistently glossed his portrayal of Bob Hawke as exploratory rather than destructive. Nevertheless, irrespective of the political impact of his caricature of Hawke, its excoriating brilliance delighted viewers disappointed by the pragmatism of the Hawke Government's policies. Accordingly, those who were suspicious of the Prime Minister's opportunistic populism could find a clubbish pleasure in knowing that they were not alone. As English comedian Jeremy Hardy has commented, political satire can 'giv[e] support and cheer to those who agree [rather] than trying to change the minds of those who don't agree' (Keighron 1998, p. 140).

Nearly a decade after the dismissal of the Whitlam Government, *The Gillies Report* sought to 'maintain the rage' in its vicious depiction of a drunken John Kerr and an overprivileged and self-serving Malcolm Fraser. Yet, in revisiting these past misdeeds, *The Gillies Report* also became a kind of celebration of the satirical possibilities of political life. This is particularly evident in the show's big musical numbers like the mini-opera 'Il Dismissale'. The show's writers also had great fun with the emergence of the Democrats, with their perceived lack of policies being a constant theme. In one long monologue Gillies played Democrats founder, Don Chipp, as a pantomime figure whose political project required the kind of magical thinking that brings Tinkerbell back to life in *Peter Pan*. It could be argued that this portrayal was as much about the cleverness of the conceit as it was about exposing truths.

Phillip Adams quite happily acknowledges that his personal passion for political satire has as much to do with his delight in this kind of entertainment, as it does with satire's capacity to



make a difference. Note, for instance, his observations about George W Bush, who has certainly been a gift to American news satirists such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert:

Bush is hilarious, monstrous, appalling, beyond belief, but fundamentally a hoot. Our mob, they're venal, they're nasty and they're just not amusing. And nor is Mr Rudd. (Das 2006, p. 16)

The aficionado's delight in the capacity of politics to amuse was very much a part of the response of reviewers to Gillies' comedy. In this respect, Patrick Cook has observed that the specific pleasures of recognition that *The Gillies Report* offered to people in the media gave it a cachet and a public profile that far outweighed its impact on the general TV audience.

Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that journalists of a particular age continue to cite the show with such alacrity, as they document the subsequent decline of TV satire. Since the end of the eighties, the media have been hosting semi-regular post-golden-age discussions in which one or two ABC programs and Clarke and Dawe are singled out as the lone keepers of the satirical flame. In 1998, radio presenter Kylie Morris charted the landscape of Australian political satire with the pessimism characteristic of this kind of survey:

Anyone with an appetite for political satire could starve in Australia at the moment. Especially if that appetite was built on the rich TV diet of the '80s. ('Beyond a joke', 1998)

It should be noted that in reporting such slim satirical pickings, Morris chose to ignore the panel show *Good News Week* that screened on the ABC from 1996-98 (and on the Ten Network from 1999-2000), despite having invited the show's head writer, Ian Simmons, to take part in this *Background Briefing* commentary. Apparently, only serious, grown-up political satire was at stake; not the kind that emanated from the games and quips of a decidedly non-literary panel show.



More perverse, though, was Morris' celebration of the satirical riches of the eighties when, except for six minutes of *Rubbery Figures* each week⁹, *The Gillies Report* was the only instance of political satire on TV. Moreover, when *Gillies Republic* was broadcast in 1986, the show was considered a disappointment. Cook's 1988 satirical effort, *The Dingo Principle*, and the 1992 series, *Gillies and Company*, were also panned by the critics for not measuring up to the standards set in *The Gillies Report*. The parameters of made-for-TV political satire had been set. In the case of *Gillies Republic*, new satirical energy had been sought in Paul Keating's infamous comment about Australia becoming a banana republic. But Gillies may have needed a change of government to re-instil satirical vigour into his style of political caricature and, in fact, his subsequent stage portrayal of John Howard was much celebrated.¹⁰

For the time being, more of the same was not what audiences or critics wanted. Yet, in lamenting the disappearance of Gillies' style of satire from television, many commentators have chosen to attribute its absence to a growing political apathy within the electorate, rather than to changing entertainment tastes or to a more wide-ranging definition of the political. Commentators persist in tracking the political seriousness of the post-Whitlam generation through their lack of interest in the comedy of politics or, alternatively, their preference for an inferior version of this kind of comedy. Before it received the back-handed legitimisation of being dumped, *The Glass House* was routinely dismissed by commentators as a callow 'attempt' to be satirical for an audience who cared nothing about politics. Just as *Good News Week* was not sufficiently worthy to make the *Background Briefing* list in 1998, when Radio National hosted a discussion in 2005 about the decline of satire, *The Glass House* was ignored, even though it was into the fourth year of its five-year run. In pointing out the increasing need for political satire within the repressive political climate of post-September 11 politics, Jonathan Biggins had no hesitation in naming *The Glass House*



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alongside *The Chaser* as part of a tradition of political satire on ABC television (2006, p. 8). Jim Schembri was, however, more representative in his scornful dismissal of those who would elevate *The Glass House* beyond its station: 'But let's get serious. *The Glass House* doesn't even come close to being political satire. It never has. It's a light entertainment show' (2006, p. 20). In contrast, most of the disaffected viewers who contributed to the show's message board after it had been decommissioned foregrounded the show's political slant as integral to its appeal.

When ABC's director of television, Kim Dalton, defended the decision to end *The Glass House*, he parried criticism that the ABC had been overly deferential to the Howard Government by proclaiming the national broadcaster's support for *The Chaser's War on Everything* (2006, p. 15). Like *The Gillies Report*, *The Chaser* has an almost swaggering fearlessness that works as an opportune marker of the Corporation's own brave independence and its unwavering commitment to 'full-blooded' political satire. In Jim Schembri's (2006) opinion, the ABC has wisely sorted the satirical wheat from the chaff, a view that reveals an anxiety that underpins much of the discussion of the fate of political satire in this country: the fear that the 'real thing' will be diminished or rendered ineffective by lazier, less pure, and less intelligent social comment.

The policing of the boundaries of TV satire is curiously reminiscent of the institutional distinction made between serious comedy and light entertainment in the ABC of the sixties (Bye, Collins & Turnbull 2007, p. 132). Considering the fusty elitism of this kind of categorical distinction, it is fascinating that it continues to be used to colonise the space of political comedy. It should be noted that Max Gillies, Don Watson and John Clarke shun golden-age speak when they are asked to contribute to media discussions about the decline of satire. Clarke, in particular, has suggested that there is a danger that his generation might foreclose on the possibilities of expression available to those who follow in its wake:



If a generation gets to a point where it kind of feels that it is now running things, then there is a possibility that it'll lose that irony and get terribly pompous and play keepings off, you know, it's then imperilled by the talent of the next generation not excited by it. ('Beyond a joke', 1998)

The ABC is a notoriously contested site with its television service being subject to particular scrutiny, as viewers, critics and parliamentarians all have an opinion on what they want 'their ABC' to be. A central issue for those who are most passionate about the ABC's independence and level of funding is the concern that it should be a space where decisions may be made unfettered by commercial interests. In the struggle over the programming content on the ABC, this issue, which is essentially one of citizenship, is in danger of being perceived as a generational issue. In the case of the comedy of politics, anxieties about it not being done properly—of viewers indulging themselves in what Guy Rundle has described as 'satire-lite' (2006, p. 18)—function as a kind of border protection. In this context, *The Gillies Report* is celebrated as a benchmark for political satire on television not only because of its audacity and inventiveness, but because of its capacity to represent both a bolder and more daring ABC and a more politically astute viewing audience.

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Notes

1. *The Mavis Bramston Show* (ATN 7, 1964-1968) survives in popular memory as a great program and as an aberration in commercial television programming, but it is remembered more for its daring newness than for its politics.
2. Nevertheless, Rod Quantock and his team must have been taken aback by the Liberal Party's decision to reference the show in a scare campaign about a Labor wealth tax. Newspaper ads were emblazoned with the slogan 'Australia, you're standing in it! Labor's tax minefield'.
3. *Gillies Report* writer Don Watson has commented: 'I mean I think *The Gillies Report* probably broke a lot of new ground. There was another show called *Australia You're Standing in It* before *The Gillies Report*, which really broke new ground. And we came in after that' ('Beyond a Joke', 1997).
4. In fact, Peter Keighron has suggested that the 'literariness' and weight of tradition that accompanies the tradition of political satire has led British political comedians to avoid the label (1998, p. 128).
5. See, for instance, *Weekend Australian Magazine*, 3-4 November 1984, p. 11.
6. Answering criticism that the ABC lacked direction, these ads listed goals of the organisation and concluded: 'So you can criticise us if you will – after all, constructive criticism is helpful – but please let your comments be based on fact'. See, for instance, *National Times*, 2-8 November 1984.
7. Hawke found himself face to face with Gillies' caricature of him on a number of occasions, one of which was described by Patrick Cook in an interview with Murray Bramwell: 'He came right over and said: "I haven't seen your show; I've heard it's not very good but we can all do better, can't we?" Then he went out and lost eight seats' (1992, p.223).
8. 'When a silk-suited Mr Hawke pushed the tan suede and leather hat on his silver mane the crowd of punks, mohicans and teeny boppers roared "Good-on-ye-Bob"' ('Hawke's encore appearance on Countdown – five years later', *The Weekend Australian*, 27-28 October 1984, p. 3).



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9. Beginning as a weekly segment on the hour-long news and current affairs show *The National*, this satirical puppet show became *Rubbery Figures* after the demise of *The National* in 1987. In 1989 *Rubbery Figures* moved to the Seven Network to become part of the sketch comedy show *Fast Forward*.
10. It was used to great effect by the political lobby group Get Up in the lead up to the 2007 federal election.



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