

Funny, that: why humour is a hit-and-miss affair on the election campaign trail

Written by Mark Rolfe, Honorary associate, School of Social Sciences, UNSW

If fact-checking units can award politicians ticks for telling the truth, surely we should award them clown faces for telling good jokes. And despite some honourable mentions, fewer such honours will be granted during the 2019 federal election than previous campaigns.

Of course, spontaneous humour is harder for our current crop of candidates, nursed through cosseted campaigns and covered by 24-hour media. In long-ago campaigns their forebears competed on soapboxes on corners, often outside opposing pubs, or in raucous town hall meetings. This frequently aggressive street theatre was no holds barred and, like stand-up comedians, politicians had to shout down hecklers.

A consummate performer of this art was Australia's fourth prime minister, George Reid (1904-5). His large girth prompted one heckler to point at his large stomach and ask, "What are you going to call it, George?", to which Reid replied:

If it's a boy, I'll call it after myself. If it's a girl I'll call it Victoria. But if, as I strongly suspect, it's nothing but piss and wind, I'll name it after you.

In 1972, the famously quick-witted Gough Whitlam had this to say to a man who incessantly badgered him about abortion:

Let me make quite clear that I am for abortion and, in your case, sir, we should make it retrospective!

Clearly the "good ol' days" of politics were not solely filled with calm and reasoned debate. The humour could be personal but also persuasive, something that has been known since Aristotle (384–322 BCE) composed his lectures on rhetoric.

A speaker can make an audience laugh in a way that increases our regard for their standing

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and reputation, which is known in rhetoric as *ethos*. That is why [comedian Mort Sahl](#) contributed jokes to John Kennedy's campaign and Gerald Ford [employed a comic speechwriter](#)

At his [campaign launch](#) , and after his wife had introduced him, Shorten joked:

I'm sure that everyone here and across Australia can understand why I'm happy to be known as Chloe Shorten's husband.

He had [taken a lead](#) from John Kennedy at a Paris media luncheon in 1961:

I do not think it altogether inappropriate to introduce myself to this audience. I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it.

A politician may want to prove their ethos by showing they can take jokes and insults, as the then NSW premier, Mike Baird, did when emulating Barack Obama by reading mean tweets.

Similarly, LNP Senator Matt Canovan put the joke on himself with one of the basic onion recipes from Tony's Kitchen Rules.

Of course, election are also slugfests, and nasty jokes aimed at opponents can be devastating if done well. To that end, the parties have digital units, such as [Innovative and Agile Memes](#) and [ALP Spicy Meme Stash](#) , which use current cultural memes such as Married at First Sight to demolish the aspect of ethos known as moral character.

The Coalition's sole strategy is to undermine Shorten and ignore everything else outside that

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personal frame. Here's an example from LNP Senator James McGrath:

For his part, Shorten provided the major (probably prepared) joke of the first debate when he [ribuffed Morrison](#) with "you're a classic space invader" in order to retake the advantage.

The Coalition has been unable to drop a comedic barrage on the formidable Penny Wong, who is promoted by the ALP as one of the strong team surrounding Shorten that Morrison doesn't have. Unsurprisingly, she mocked that vacuum:

[Analysts of humour](#) since Sigmund Freud have known humour can express superiority over others, even to the extent of wanting to discipline others to comply with certain social values and conduct. So we must not shy away from the fact that we can enjoy nasty humour, even based in stereotypes of other parties:

Because of the long history of anti-politics animus in our democracy and humour, we feel little compunction in hurling vitriol at politicians, especially ones we don't like:

An old quandary of satire since Thomas More's 1551 treatise Utopia is the conflict over the path of purity or pragmatism in politics. In partisan politics, this can be simplified for advantage into the [accusation of a sell-out](#).

Paul Keating is remembered as a deft exponent of political humour, yet his most memorable zingers were from his parliamentary performances, which turned off many people. Question Time is more structured for combat than difficult and fluid campaigns.

In the final week of the 1996 campaign, Keating appeared in [an interview](#) with Roy and HG. Despite being on a comedy show, Keating was serious, attempting to ameliorate the common view of his aggressive ethos. In effect HG accuses him of being a shadow of his former rambunctious self in the "whimpering to the line" of both sides.

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Politicians and parties are not comedians like Frankie Boyle or Jim Jefferies aiming to provoke social boundaries. There are important limits to humour in politics. That is why Advance Australia [failed spectacularly](#) with its Captain GetUp! character rubbing himself against a billboard of Zali Steggall, Tony Abbott's challenger in Warringah. Equally, [GetUp! failed](#) when lampooning Abbott as a uninterested lifesaver shortly after two people had drowned.

Much of the humour in this election seems to preach to the converted. Nevertheless, we can easily enjoy not only nasty humour but also negative campaigning, despite our principled avowals to others of the opposite. We want the luxury of enjoying both our principles and our character assassinations.

Mark Rolfe does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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