The Hollowmen and the sport of satire

What does our television tell us about Australian democracy? Over time, spin becomes truth. In the ABC’s new satire 'The Hollowmen', political advisors find that they can no longer tell the difference, even to themselves, between spin and the ‘real’ truth of an issue.

'Hollowmen' is an insider’s program, and it is extraordinary that over a million people watched the first episode. Presumably many will be horrified but also validated by what they have seen. 'The Hollowmen’s' core message—that Australian politics is inherently without values or moral grounding—is a belief many Australians already hold, often at the same time believing that the government should intrude further and further into aspects of daily life.

Political satire has a long pedigree. From Yes, Minister back in 1980—a show that seems in hindsight, surprisingly innocent—to this year's Hollowmen, the way in which comedians and writers have portrayed politicians, their staffers and the public service tells us something about how democracy is practised and perceived in the Anglo-sphere.

Each program reflects the political climate of its time, and the elites’ received wisdom about the motivations of politicians, the public and bureaucrats. Yes, Minister—on the surface a satire of the relationship between public servants and politicians—was a strong critique of the mid-century British mixed economy. The manipulation of trade deals, tariff and licensing boards, and state run enterprises by politicians for political expediency so devastatingly depicted in Yes, Minister was as good an argument for deregulation and privatisation as any presented by the incoming reformist Tories.

Similarly, the BBC series The Thick Of It, first aired in 2005, reflects British politics in the late Blair era where Ministers are seen to have become subservient to a centralised cadre of media and policy enforcers from the Prime Minister’s office—Alistair Campbell and his staff. Policy is no longer the battle-ground seen in Yes, Minister. Now it is only process and media perceptions.

The US series The West Wing was not only about defying the Democrats, it was also equally about the nobility of government. Staffers and the President both appeared as committed, intelligent and caring. It is ironic perhaps that the nation that prides itself on rugged individualism and small government produced the most pro-government homage. Of course The West Wing was never conceived as a satire. Aaron Sorkin, its creator, has described his show as ‘kind of a Valentine to public service.’ Despite this, The West Wing is funny for many of the same reasons political satire self-consciously is and the laughs don’t come from the worthiness but from seeing people deal with the process of government—after all this is the show that devoted an episode to how the census is collected, and made it funny.

Cynicism ≠ critique

The Hollowmen is a product of Australians distrust of the political process. It’s full of the cheap shots those outside the process routinely make about insiders. That they’re all entirely self-interested, not very smart and inherently corrupt. Australian political satire is an extension of a national distrust of politicians.

Yet this approach avoids a deeper and more convincing critique of politics. Trivialising the lives and behaviour of politicians may be good sport but these people have the power to profoundly influence our lives. To infantilise politicians, as cheap political satire too often tends to do, is to give them, in a way, a free pass for bad public policy.

The Hollowmen depicts politicians as almost entirely irrelevant to the function of government. In the first episode the only appearance of the Prime Minister was dressed as a banana—perhaps implying that cring-inducing stunts are all politicians are good for anyway. In the second episode we see the hackneyed cliché of the venal time-serving thug, determined to get his plum diplomatic post in return for vacating his Senate seat.

By contrast, in Yes Minister or the acidic The Thick of It, politicians are portrayed as holding specific roles within the process. Politicians work with their advisors, press secretaries and even, on occasion, departmental heads against external threats. Yes, great humour is derived from their vanity, their pomposity and their pettiness, but fear dominates their lives. Chris Langham, the actor who played the cabinet minister in The Thick of It expressed the crucial difference between the Australian and British approach. ‘The view of politicians in [The Thick of It] is quite compassionate I think. What you end up seeing, partly because of the improvisational style, is them as humans. They are vulnerable, often very, very tired people, who’ve been saddled with enormous responsibility and are completely out of their depth.’

Possibly because of the overarching cynicism driving The Hollowmen, in some ways it is remarkably gentle in its depiction of the operation of power. It is hard to portray the often brilliant fe-

Louise Staley is a Research Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs.

Louise Staley
To infantalise politicians, as cheap political satire too often tends to do, is to give them a free pass for bad public policy.

To infantalise politicians, as cheap political satire too often tends to do, is to give them a free pass for bad public policy.

The Hollowmen only seems to work because it synchronises with what the political class thinks about the Rudd government. The press gallery is increasingly hostile to Rudd’s office, with a steady stream of negative stories either about the spin, or the staff, or the treatment of women.

Senior Political Advisors Murph and Neil (played by Lachy Hulme & Merrick Watts) © The Hollowmen Pty Ltd