

## 'Taking the mickey': a brave Australian tradition

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As the summer Parliamentary break loomed in Canberra in December 2006, the Federal Attorney-General, Hon. Philip Ruddock persuaded himself to defend a brave Australian tradition with some remarkable amendments to existing Copyright Law. Alone among the nations of the world, Australia will now provide legal protection for those who might otherwise be infringing intellectual property rights—if they are doing so for the purposes of satire and parody. Writing on 30 November in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* (and elsewhere), the Attorney-General explained his reasons under the heading 'Protecting Precious Parody':

Australians have always had an irreverent streak. Our cartoonists ensure sacred cows don't stay sacred for very long and comedians are merciless on those in public life. An integral part of their armoury is parody and satire—or, if you prefer, 'taking the micky' out of someone. However, our copyright laws have until now done very little to protect the way people use others' works or images to parody and satirise others in the name of entertainment.

I have a bill currently before the Senate which will ensure Australia's fine tradition of satire is safe. There will be a parody and satire exception for what the law calls 'fair dealing'. In circumstances that are fair, it means that groups like The Fanatics will be able to parody popular songs in response to the Barmy Army. It will mean they can encourage cricketers representing Australia by making a fair parody of musical works such as The Monkees' *Daydream Believer* and adding some clever lyrics. I understand the Village People's *Go West* and Robbie Williams's *Rock DJ* will get the same treatment.

No doubt they did.

Setting aside the Attorney's admirable display of 'with-it-ness' regarding pop culture, his appeal to Australian values is evident and it is unfortunate his remarks attracted little attention in the usual Christmas rush. When the country's chief law officer identifies 'Australia's fine tradition of satire' as something worth protecting and being proud of, adding that 'Australians have always had an irreverent streak', then surely an important blow has been struck for freedom and happiness and we can hold our heads a little higher as we enjoy our jokes. Even public officials such as Ministers of the Crown must take note, if they have not already, that they are fair game for satire and parody. Our custom of 'taking the mickey' out of those in power (in fair circumstances, of course, whatever that may mean) has received the ultimate accolade of endorsement by Australia's Attorney-General.

Humour can in fact be a dangerous matter, as well as entertaining. Its retaliative effects ensure that joking provides a satisfying and effective (but not always gentle) way of taking another individual or group down a peg or two, and this is especially true when it is directed by one group (or a member of a group) already established, *against* people newly-arrived

either to the group or to a country, when they are experiencing the 'shock of the new'. In the case of Australian humour, many collectors and commentators remark how frequently it is directed not just (respectably) at *ourselves*, but aggressively, even racially, at the others, both older and newer arrivals than ourselves (Davis and Crofts 1988; Abraham 2004). Jokes about and slang terms for 'the other' abound in Australia (of course they also do elsewhere, as Christie Davies' comparative studies of jokes around the world have shown, for example, Davies 1990, 1998, 2002). When Phillip Adams and Patrice Newell embarked on their multi-volume collections of Australian jokes for Penguin, they commented in amazement on how many offensive (and racist) contemporary jokes they managed to collect and print without much outraged objection coming their way. They remarked with considerable honesty:

We fear the 'other', what we deem to be foreign or alien, and so tell savage, uncivilised jokes about Aborigines, Jews, migrants....Jokes that are bigoted, blasphemous or phobic outnumber all other categories. (1996 8)

Although the impact of such jokes and joking may be well-intentioned, often it is hurtful, even deeply offensive. Many societies at different times evolve formal social conventions to counteract such effects. Nevertheless Australia seems to have responded with few such taboos or conventions to restrict the traditionally wide licence for joking and humour—at least not until the advent in the 1990s of political correctness, a movement which has sparked to some extent its own counter-revolution as comedians and individuals protest limitations on their self-expression (Matte: 1995). In fact, most collections of Australian jokes and humour make the point that, to *be* an Australian, it is necessary to embrace the aggressive forms of humour that they illustrate. As the British writer, Ken Hunt, ironically puts it, '[t]o live in Australia, Aussies have to have a sense of humour. It's a cheap form of entertainment and helps pass the time' (1993: 42).

Thus Australian humour seems to enjoy a vulgar, popular licence much wider than that found in many other cultures and groups. In 2000, I was invited to speak about Australian humour at a conference convened in Osaka.<sup>1</sup> In trying to convey to the largely Japanese audience the essence of this anti-authoritarian and levelling humour, and also in writing later for an English-speaking audience about the complex and restrictive social conventions which surround the use of humour in Japan (2006), I realised that the most confronting thing about Australian humour for non-Australians is not necessarily its obscure, colloquial references (for example that swagmen are not hoboes, that billabongs and creeks are different bodies of water, that a dunny is not found indoors), nor even its crudity and offensiveness, but rather its ubiquitous and unavoidable occurrence, regardless of time, place and social space/s. For Australians, using and appreciating (or at least tolerating) humour is not so much permitted as compulsory.

Ours is in fact a culture which deploys humour quite openly as a weapon to identify those who are truly 'at home', both in the land and in the

mainstream of society. In this sense, it is the conventions and style of the 'jok(e)-ing' rather than those of the jokes which indicate 'Australian-ness'—that is, how Australians *use* humour, rather than the nature of the humour used. Visitors and new arrivals can and do find themselves under humorous attack from the moment they set foot in the country and often needing a degree of explanation and mediation to survive the experience.

It is possible this joking licence was inherited from rivalries and tensions between our original, disparate Irish and British settler groups, and reflected mockery of class and dialect, as well as of differing religious beliefs. It is also possible, as Inga Clendinnen has intriguingly suggested in *Dancing with Strangers* (2005), that over time, an introduced tradition of wry Cockney and Irish humour has subtly evolved to mirror one already then pre-existing among our Indigenous ancestors. Certainly her study shows how, in initial exchanges between the two cultures, there was surprising good-will towards the new arrivals, combined with mockery at their incapacity in the bush. Now, however, when most of our Indigenous communities suffer from a profound sense of powerlessness, joking back with 'survival laughter' may be more essential than ever. Urban myths such as those surrounding the origins of naming Melbourne's annual Moomba Festival suggest examples of how taking the mickey might operate in retaliation against well-meaning attempts at cross-cultural understanding. It seems unlikely, according to students of the Victorian Aboriginal languages that the word *moom + ba* could ever signify 'let's get together and have fun', as in the official Victorian Chamber of Commerce explanation. Something a good deal ruder seems more plausible.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the origins, this Aussie custom called 'taking the mickey' (baiting others, particularly the obviously 'other', with joking, teasing and insult) now enjoys such broad social permission that objecting in any particular instance is ineffective, even when the experience (as not infrequently happens) is offensive. Hidden cultural rules decree that when its victim either rejects the baiting or 'doesn't get it', by definition the mickey has been taken. Thus the only truly effective response is to accept that the mickey has indeed been taken, to appreciate its skill and to reply in kind. Most Australians believe that taking the mickey in this way is effectively their own national civil liberty. Most newcomers need to have this explained.

Although like the Attorney-General, I call this practice 'taking the mickey', authorities on British and Australian slang agree that this is a euphemism for an older term which has itself re-entered public discourse in more recent years—'taking the piss'. Thus both may be heard in today's Australia, perhaps reflecting something of a reverse generation gap in usage. According to *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (2006), the politer term owes its origin to rhyming slang and originally to Irish slang usage of the noun 'mickey' (which could mean both penis and vagina, as well as becoming an early Australian term for a young unbranded bull—see both *The Macquarie Book of Slang* (2000) and *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (1992) sv mickey).

In rhyming slang, the variants *mike bliss* and *mickey bliss* both stood for *piss*, and Partridge defines the (United Kingdom) meaning of ‘to take the mike/mickey [bliss]’ as ‘to take the piss; to make a fool of someone; to pull someone’s leg’. He explains that ‘TO PISS and hence deflate a bladder gives the central idea of deflation, in this case by making a fool of; perhaps coincidentally an inflated bladder (on a stick) is the mediaeval comedy prop associated with a fool’ (Partridge 2006: 1439). *Franklyn’s Dictionary of Rhyming Slang* (1961) agrees, as do Australian authorities; although *The Macquarie Book of Slang* (2000) offers slightly different definitions of the two terms—the original and the rhyming—as in ‘to take the piss out of (someone); to stir, to make fun of (someone)’ (181) and ‘to take the mickey out of: to make seem foolish, tease’ (152). The implication is that the cruder term might apply to a tougher form of ‘stirring’ or rebellious humour than mere teasing. This shading in meaning however is faint and is not borne out by other dictionaries such as the *Oxford* (1992) which finds the two interchangeable from 1945 onwards, defining ‘to take the piss (out of)’ as ‘[t]o make fun of, “take the mickey”’ (169).

The connection between piss and bluster deserves a brief comment. Francis Grose’s pioneering *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, capturing the eighteenth century canting terms of ‘Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence’ records:

PISS. ‘He shall not piss my money against the wall’; he shall not have my money to spend in liquor.

PISS MAKER. A great drinker, one much given to liquor.

PISS-PROUD. Having a false erection. ‘That old fellow thought he had an erection, but his—was only piss-proud’; said of any old fellow who marries a young wife.

Connotations like these make it easy to see *piss* as (*pace* Partridge) not merely inflationary, but also a worthless consequence of much drinking, a poor substitute for the real thing (as in *piss-weak*), something inviting exposure and laughter. Indeed elsewhere Partridge (1970) confirms this with an early twentieth century entry on ‘Piss and wind, as in “he’s all piss and wind!”’. Empty talk; unsubstantiated boast(s).

In reviewing the printed evidence of usage, it is significant to note that the earliest examples of the rhyming slang term appear in memoirs intended to capture the violent rough and tumble of life in the early twentieth century in the market street of Hoxton, London, and in women’s gaols (George Ingram’s *Cockney Cavalcade*, 1935, and Joan Henry’s *Who Lie in Gaol: Reminiscences of Life in Holloway and Askham Grange Prisons*, 1952). In records of the older, cruder term, the first English printed example comes from Brendan Behan’s fictionalised account, *Borstal Boy* (1958). In Australia, however, the earliest example recorded is from 1976 and it testifies to a particularly Australian habit of behaviour already mentioned: ‘Country jokers like to take the piss out of Sydney guys’ (David Ireland’s novel, *The Glass Canoe*: 22).

Whether it is 'taking the mickey' or 'taking the piss', both terms are now common (almost interchangeable, although the second perhaps indicates a somewhat tougher form of joking) as expressions for trying to taunt or tease someone, trying to reduce the brash confidence of a new arrival who displays unfamiliarity with the new land and its ways, trying to challenge authority and attack a sacred cow or two as the Attorney-General puts it. This may traditionally be done without retribution, or offence being taken, whether victims are friends or strangers, equals or superiors. The practice is an enduring feature of Australian public and private life and even in these latter days of legislation designed to outlaw sedition, vilification and defamation, most Australians would agree that it is their democratic right to challenge in this way their elders, their betters, their enemies, their friends, and of course themselves.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that taking the mickey on (or out of—the usage is variable) an authority figure does not constitute a serious or revolutionary challenge. Rather, it is a condition imposed on acknowledgement of and acceptance of the status quo. Recognition of power and status is qualified with the assertion of a common, shared status at the level of humorous interplay. As many scholars have observed about Australian humour in general (for example Jones and Andrews 1988b 74), Australia is not deeply revolutionary, but rather, equivocal in its attitudes to power. To Joseph Furphy's famous descriptor<sup>5</sup> of his quintessentially Australian novel, *Such is Life* ('Temper: democratic; bias: offensively Australian') one might add, 'Joking: Incessant'. Mr Ruddock, despite his public seriousness, clearly understands this well.

In order to enjoy this equivocal use of humour to the full, whether it comes from comic performers on stage or in everyday life, it's a good idea to know something about how to handle it. Taking the mickey is fine *if* you know the rules, but more treacherous if you don't; and even experienced residents can occasionally be puzzled. Although the American fantasy-writer, Jack Dann,<sup>6</sup> had then lived in Australia for more than a decade, in June 1999 he recounted in an interview in *The Weekend Australian* how he was still bemused by the answer to what he thought was a straightforward question about where to find the toilets at a petrol station in the country: 'Ah,' replied the station attendant, 'You'll need a compass and a cut lunch for that.'

Deconstructed (and allowing for Americans who may perhaps not know that a 'cut lunch' is sandwiches), the comic response indicates that the place is hard to find, requiring an all-day wilderness trek with compass and lunch for safety. Hence, it may be deduced that the toilets were a long way off and hard to find. *Or are they?* An equally possible explanation is, that the attendant was taking the mickey on the unobservant Yankee, pointing out that they were merely one step behind him and obvious to all except the questioner. So let me provide some concluding words of advice. After much thought and reflecting on my past years of experience as a double immigrant to Australia (once as a child and again as an adult under provisions applying to overseas wives of Australian businessmen), I propose some rules for how to cope with having the mickey taken:

## Coping with Aussie humour

1. Be prepared for:

- ambiguity
- surprise
- reversals of meaning
- meiosis (wild understatement) and or high exaggeration
- broad Strine (broader the better)
- deadpan insults and absurd statements

2. Adopt a straight face (until light dawns)

3. Have a go at decoding before asking, 'please explain?'

4. Mentally rate (on a scale of 1–10):

- colourful metaphor, curses
- originality and wit

5. Don't leap to the defence when:

- friends/superiors are insulted
- friends insult themselves

6. Beware joining in (unless you know the rules)

7. When YOU are insulted—

REJOICE—you are an Aussie too!

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## Endnotes

1. Hosted by the Japan Society for Laughter and Humor Studies at Kansai University, Osaka, July 2000.
2. ANU website for Australian National Dictionary Centre, Australian Words sv Moomba <http://www.anu.edu.au/andc/res/aewords/index>:

Moomba is the name of a carnival held annually in Melbourne from 1955. One of its distinctive features is a procession of floats etc. through the streets of the city.

The term is popularly regarded as being an Aboriginal word meaning 'let's get together and have fun'. Thus C. McGregor in *Profile of Australia* (1966) writes: 'Melbourne's Moomba (an

aboriginal word meaning “Let’s get together and have fun”) [is] a yearly event during which floats parade through the city.’

In 1969 Louise Hercus in *The Languages of Victoria* sounded a warning:

*Mum*, bottom, rump. The jocular Healesville expression *mum ba* ‘bottom and..’ has been given to the authorities in jest with the translation ‘let us get together and have fun’, hence the Melbourne Moomba Festival. Victorian Aboriginal languages with the word *mum* for ‘bottom, anus’ include Wuywuring and Wemba-wemba.

In 1981 Barry Blake in his *Australian Aboriginal Languages* spelt out the etymology in more detail:

Undoubtedly the most unfortunate choice of a proper name from Aboriginal sources was made in Melbourne when the city fathers chose to name the city’s annual festival ‘Moomba’. The name is supposed to mean ‘Let’s get together and have fun’, though one wonders how anyone could be naive enough to believe that all this can be expressed in two syllables. In fact ‘moom’ (*mum*) means ‘buttocks’ or ‘anus’ in various Victorian languages and ‘ba’ is a suffix that can mean ‘at’, ‘in’ or ‘on’. Presumably someone has tried to render ‘up your bum’ in the vernacular.

Also at <http://www.eniar.org/news/Moomba.html>

3. 2nd edition (London: C. Chappel, 1811).
4. Ingram: ‘He [Mac the leader] wouldn’t let Pancake “take the mike” out of him. He [Pancake] was always trying to show off and make out that he was the leader.’ (1935 27); Henry: ‘She’s a terror. I expect she’ll try and take the mickey out of you all right. Don’t you stand for nothin.’ (1952: 39).
5. Furphy on *Such is Life* to J. F. Archibald, 4 April 1897, quoted in John Barnes, *The Order of Things: A Life of Joseph Furphy*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 249.
6. Author of *Starhike* (1977), *Junction* (Dell, 1981), *The Man Who Melted* (St Martins Press, 1984), *The Silent* (Bantam, 1998), interviewed by Murray Waldren in *The Weekend Australian*, 12–13 June 1999.