



CARTOONING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Olivia Emily illustrates how one artist is creating comic relief amidst the bleak picture of climate despair

All my cartoons are really about my feelings. And that's exhausting. Cartooning obviously isn't a real job at all but it can be really hard," says Andrew Marlton, resident political cartoonist at The Guardian Australia, who usually goes under the pseudonym 'First Dog on the Moon'. "At the end of the day, I can be quite weary, because I'm such a sook [Australian for 'crybaby']," says Marlton.

Marlton publishes around three cartoons in The Guardian Australia every week, an online-only Australian version of the British newspaper, and Australia's sixth most popular news site. They feature simple but colourful line drawings of animals and talking objects that comment on Australian politics.

In recent years, the climate crisis and Australian politics have become more entangled than ever. "I get incredibly angry about climate change, because it's a really good example of how democracy has been eaten up by money and greedy people," says Marlton. From 23 February to 9 March 2022, eastern Australia was devastated by flooding which caused an estimated AUD \$2.5bn worth of damage,

equivalent to just under £1.4bn.

"It is frustrating because we all bang on about it. Except the government doesn't," Marlton says. "It's not even rocket science anymore – it's climate science. We know that if you stop burning fossil fuels today, we will slow the progress of climate change.

"It is all factual and sensible," Marlton says. "And yet it's going completely in the wrong direction, to the point where we've got these incredible floods in New South Wales, and people are dying, and thousands and thousands of people are being made homeless.

"Can one brave, handsome cartoonist from *The Guardian* change all that?"

he muses. "Surprise! Well, no one was surprised to find out that they couldn't."

Marlton grapples with his feelings of powerlessness in his cartoons, drawing on a Wacom Cintiq, a digital drawing tool that makes for easier editing via Photoshop. As well as drawings, Marlton's cartoons are filled with text – a sans-serif font emulating handwriting. "There are too many words," Marlton admits. "My editors and I agree. And yet there they are, every time. I finish a cartoon and there's all the words and my editors are like, 'what are you doing?' But I have all these things to say.

"Sometimes it's sort of like illustrated op-eds," he adds. "But the thing is, of course, that it's a cartoon, so adding nice or funny pictures and then putting jokes in doesn't subsume the message, but it makes it go into your brain more easily. Or it's more palatable.

"It's a very satisfying way of working, and people seem to like it," he says. "It doesn't achieve its goals in that I haven't saved

Marlton's cartoons feature a range of typically non-verbal characters. All cartoons reprinted with Andrew Marlton's permission.

How do we go on!? Racked with guilt and grief and climate despair – who would have thought the end of civilisation and the oceans would be so depressing?!



the world yet, but it achieves the goals of getting information and jokes into people's faces."

Australia's 2019/20 bushfire season – or Summer – made global headlines for its unprecedented intensity, duration, and uncontrollability. It is thought to be the most expensive natural disaster in Australian history at an estimated AUD \$100bn (£55bn). At the start of 2022, the koala – an iconic Australian animal – was listed as endangered in Queensland, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory, with the Black Summer cited as an exacerbating factor in their dwindling numbers.

Despite the direct consequences of climate change in Australia, the government has been criticised as 'climate deniers', with the nation still mining and exporting coal, for example. In 2020, Australian coal burned overseas generating almost double the nation's domestic greenhouse gas emissions.

As Australia burned in the 2019/20 wildfires – which experts agree were exacerbated by climate change – Marlton drew a smoke-covered cartoon addressing the government's inaction. In the cartoon, he renames Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison 'Soot Morrison', and writes: "Soot didn't light these fires but he refused to prepare for them so he might as well have." In the final frame, he adds: "We are on our own now – the government is not coming to save us (there's no money in it) – we are on our own."

Marlton is notorious at The Guardian Australia for his lack of negative comments, despite the political – and overtly left-leaning – nature of his cartoons. "Well, it's a penguin," Marlton says in response. "You can't argue with a penguin – you'll look like a fool.

"I have to be careful, because you can't necessarily have a pineapple explaining the situation in Palestine," he adds. As well as the titular 'First Dog' himself, Marlton's cartoons feature a range of recurring, traditionally non-verbal characters from across the plant and animal kingdoms. "But you can have a pineapple and an avocado on a bus having a conversation about all sorts of things that you might think that they couldn't. And people's brains might not necessarily tweak to that fact. You can get away with a lot when you're a pineapple."

Though Marlton isn't so keen on people using his cartoons as a news source – "that's not ideal" – he likes that his cartoons resonate with people, make complex issues more accessible, and offer respite from the tumultuous world. "What do we find in this despair and in this world ending disaster, or COVID-19, or whatever we're in?" he asks. "How do we find these moments of joy to give us relief? Or how do we find a path through to something better?"

"I don't have answers to those things," he says. "But it's good to rummage around in them, because I'm wary of hope. But we can't all just sit around being miserable all day if our circumstances allow us to have relief from it." →

