

Anyone can be a critic!

A simple statement with so many connotations.

What is a critic?

It could be a **professional person** who assesses the merits of artistic or literary works ... presumably from a baseline level of accredited expertise.

Or it could be a more **amateur reaction** to a message, email or public statement that sufficiently irks you to respond with your own fairly expressed views ... as a provoked member of the public ... wishing to express an opinion within the parameters of decency, respect and the law.

Criticism is an important part of a democratic society – the ability to hold those in power ... to account. And on many occasions, the critique can be **well-considered** and **helpful**.

On other occasions, it may be more **knee-jerk**, often without much thought other than to express anger, frustration or powerlessness. It is an **opportunity to blame someone ... other than self**.

There is a big difference between **a decision maker taking the responsibility** for a perhaps unpopular or contentious policy, in the public interest ... and **the critic who carries no responsibility** but might be inconvenienced/irritated/offended to the extent of wanting his/her opinion to be heard.

Clever criticism has been around for centuries – often witty, sometimes as cartoons ... and **usually based on considerable thought**.

Let's focus on the 'clever', first.

Cicero, the Roman senator, lawyer, writer and philosopher (106 BCE – 43 BCE),¹ used clever techniques to **'not say' what he was actually saying**. For example, Cicero would claim that 'he won't mention ...' and then, in doing so under that guise, he would broadcast **all of his criticisms**. That process of pretending to protect the information while 'innocently' disclosing all the critiques is known as *apophasis*.²

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicero>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apophasis>

In the speeches³ prosecuting a Cataline conspiracy to overthrow the Roman government of the time, Cicero deliberately asks a whole slew of **rhetorical** questions. His critical intent is to point out and highlight the ‘alleged absurdity’ that the members of the *alleged guilty party* are still here in court, **unpunished** for alleged treason – shock, horror! This was an intentional technique to influence judicial and public opinion ... without the accused getting an easy chance to rebut.

Cicero was quite polished at his oratorical strategies - **a fine critic of his times.**

The writer of the Shakespearean play ‘**Julius Caesar**’ (circa 1599) had a well-read understanding of the writings of both Plutarch⁴ and Suetonius⁵ for the history of the events of 44 BCE.

He had Mark Anthony deliver his eulogy for Caesar (to Caesar’s actual murderers, in that febrile post-murder atmosphere of his funeral) ... **by couching his criticism in subtle sarcastic wording.**

The ‘*Friends, Romans, Countrymen*’ iconic speech is **a master class of irony.** Mark Anthony frames his ‘*I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him*’ speech into the very opposite meaning ... skilfully turning his ‘innocent’ words against his opponents ... and **actually** praising the late Caesar.⁶

It is **polished criticism at its best** ... although, quite possibly, not written by the grain trader from Stratford-on-Avon, for whom the only evidence of his actual handwriting is but a few scribbled signatures.

Much more probably, the play was written by Edward de Vere⁷ who was widely travelled (including living in Italy for over a year. cf *Merchant of Venice*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Romeo and Juliet*), skilled in Royal Court protocols, well educated in Latin philosophy and the subtleties of language use ... he was very literate.

Feel free to read the debates on the Shakespearean identity on-line ... but start with the actual checkable evidence. (That was just my quiet amateur effort at illustrating my essay title, ‘**Anyone can be a critic!**’)

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catilinarian_orations

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plutarch>

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suetonius>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends,_Romans,_countrymen,_lend_me_your_ears

⁷ <https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/top-reasons-why-edward-de-vere-17th-earl-of-oxford-was-shakespeare/>

Now to **less polished critiques**.

In the world of social media, sending an immediate opinion (simultaneously to many recipients) is just an easy click or a touch on a screen.

The **'pile-on'** is the general term for jumping on a band-wagon of 'likes' or outrage (**going viral**). It is reactive ... responding quickly with an emoji or comment on a readily available screen, without necessarily taking the time to check the accuracy of the original remarks or to consider the implications of the pile-on.

In the world of influencers, this is a very fertile ground for scams, disinformation and confected indignation. Addiction to the effects of those screen-time swayers can result in significant mental health challenges, particularly amongst the young.

To that extent, Australia has introduced legislation to restrict the access to many international platforms,⁸ for Under 16s. Other countries are monitoring the situation, with respect to protecting the vulnerable or impressionable.

But there are also **many occasions where criticism of people in power may well be very justified**. Cases of government corruption or indifference often need media and mass public demonstrations to get action to correct implied wrongs. Sometimes, independent investigations lead to criminal court cases ... and, in other by-passed cases, there **should** have been investigations for criminality or, at the very least, for **wilful incompetence in public office**. **Several examples will come immediately to mind.**

Where governments are using **the power of military might to subdue** their domestic populations, criticism has been mustered on mass media, on occasions like the Arab Spring rebellions in early 2010s.⁹

However, **autocratic governments have learned** ... and now, frequently, they find ways to shut down the Internet and mobile phone access ... in order to conceal the abuse of civilians, effectively hidden from view or reporting, in the media darkness. **Again, several examples will come to mind.**

⁸ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_Spring

On the bright side, most people who have responsibility or social prominence (either by their roles or achievements) within their systems of government or business, **set out to do their best**. They don't set out to court animosity or to aggrieve people. **Senior leadership roles rarely require leaders to 'mark time' but, rather, they are required to adapt the practices to meet changing circumstances**. But, if anything is done to promote **change** in public life, they must anticipate '*freedom of speech*' criticism from those who might dislike the change priorities.

It is a lot harder to be in positions of careful responsibility than it is to dash out some reactive commentary on social media or in the '*around the water-cooler*' gossip huddle or on many spontaneous talk-back radio shows. Firstly, **people in responsibility are usually much more restricted** in their allowable language and commentary while responding to often vitriolic character cheap-shots. They must be tolerant, understanding and polite. Secondly, as indicated above, most people in positions of responsibility **have to make decisions which are not universally liked ...** and they generally have to '*bite their tongues*' in the face of criticism that often doesn't help make responsible decisions better – although it may be **a salve for the disgruntled**.

Witty criticisms and cartoons usually bring a smile to many without causing grief. Criticism, from those with past experience in responsible roles, can frequently be very useful in showing a workable way forward.

But, entrenched animosity, without reasoned thought ... or accountability, is often more about the critics seeking some viewpoint attention – rather than making a concerning situation better for everyone. In a democracy, like it or not, the majority still holds sway until the next election ... try as you might to influence future voting opinion.

"Don't criticize what you can't understand." ¹⁰

— Bob Dylan

Anyone can be a critic – but useful critics are preferred!

¹⁰ <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/times-they-are-changin/>