

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 *apophysis*.²

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

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

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 oratorial 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_oration

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 concocted 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/>