

From the Editor

Chris Berg

'Sprocket Man' is a superhero produced by the US Consumer Product Safety Commission to provide bicycle safety information. In Sprocket Man's comic we see the superhero become increasingly distressed—and oddly, disembodied—as he watches American children break every road rule they can think of.

The illustration is woeful, and encourages doubt about government support of the arts.

The Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment has similarly created the Sustainables, a family of Superheros—that live in Footscray, apparently—with no discernable Super Powers, unless you count an obsessive dedication to energy efficiency. The defining characteristic of, for example, Sam 'Bags' Sustainable is that he really likes cotton bags. 'Hydra' monitors water use, 'Solaris'—the hip youth—can procure environmentally friendly appliances, and 'Lemony' cleans the house with lemon scented spray.

Of course, it is well-known that the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment has its fingers on the pulse of children's pop culture, but, for sheer bizarreness, it cannot compete with a distressed and disembodied Sprocket Man.

Government edutainment campaigns like this have almost no feedback mechanism to indicate whether they have been successful—if rates of obesity in Australia go down, could it really be attributed to the likeability of the anthropomorphic armchair in the federal government's



Sprocket Man
<http://www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/341.pdf>

Get Moving campaign? The result is a government-sponsored industry producing children's publications whose only obvious value is kitsch.

Compare the thriving commercial children's book industry with the stifflingly politically correct and utterly uncreative Sustainables. Even *Captain Planet* and *the Planeteers*, the Ted Turner-produced animated TV series with essentially the same environmentally-focused



Lemony Sustainable, from the Sustainables
<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/thesustainables/who.htm>

message as the Sustainables, displays far more creativity.

Followers of after-school television in the early 1990s can still lovingly recite the *Captain Planet* theme song and rap, and muse about the uselessness of the guy whose only power was 'heart'. While the Planeteers were focused on defending the environment from eco-villains, they had felt no shame in ripping up rainforests with their powers of earth, fire, wind and water to ensure victory. It is unlikely that any bureaucratically produced enviro-heroes would display such pragmatism.

This edition of the *IPA Review* again covers a wide range of issues, many of more consequence than children's entertainment. Alan Moran looks at the successes and failures of public transport, and urges governments to face up to the needs of consumers, rather than ideological preferences.

Ben Hourigan and Richard Allsop look at political campaigning in the twenty-first century—how should it be funded, and what should it focus on?

Ken Phillips visits a paradigm-shifting International Labour Organisation meeting which has implications for Australian labour law and the sanctity of commercial contracts across the world. Jennifer Marohasy identifies some endangered species that are actually endangered, and Tim Curtin urges environmental NGOs to check their facts before they impede development in Papua New Guinea.

Louise Staley looks at food labelling, and Hugh Tobin discovers why clubs really smell nowadays.

Peter Phelps notes that Americans are from Pluto, which perhaps helps us understand the International Astronomical Union's decision to downgrade it to a 'dwarf planet'.

And of course, our cover story, the 13 biggest mistakes in Australia, and their consequences.

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REVIEW

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From the Executive Director

John Roskam

John Gray, the British philosopher recently wrote in the *New Statesman*:

In the history of ideas as in history as a whole, our view of the past is prone to a kind of optical illusion in which we mistake what is closest to us for the dominant feature of the landscape.

He's right. What he describes is related to the tendency which assumes that because things are the way they are now, that they have always been that way, and that they will continue to be that way.

Economists understand this, and are notorious for warning against such thinking. The Australian economy hasn't always boomed. (By definition) unemployment, inflation, and interest rates haven't always been at record low levels. A few years ago Sydney was not only the country's 'international city'. Its potential for growth was unlimited.

It was the city in which everyone (supposedly) wanted to live. No longer. In August 2006 New South Wales had the highest level of unemployment of the mainland states, and its economy was in deficit. The resource-rich states of Western Australian and Queensland were allegedly the 'old economy'.

A feature of the modern world is its emphasis on 'forces' and 'movements'. There are 'forces' of globalisation and market liberalisation; and liberation movements, religious movements, and environmental movements. Forces and movements don't take account of the acts of individuals. And the reason for this is that viewing history as only forces and movements is consistent with the Marxian and neo-Marxian framework for the teaching of history. People are removed from history and replaced with uncontrollable and unstoppable forces and movements.

The point of trying to establish that something is uncontrollable and unstoppable is that therefore it is inevitable—and the inevitability of communism is that ideology's main claim to fame. (This issue is the something that has tended communist theorists some confusion. If communism is inevitable, is there any point in agitating for it.)

Marx held that history was determined by class struggle. Authors like Jared Diamond have argued that history is the outcome of environmental factors. Others nominate technological change as the driver of history.

A consequence of all of these views is that history is only forces and movements. Day-to-day politics doesn't matter and politicians are irrelevant.

Even a moment's thought shows this not to be the case. The history of the twentieth century is riddled with examples of individuals and small groups which pushed nations back and forth, in and out of totalitarianism. The Bolshevik revolution in 1917 was not caused by the grand sweep of history, but a small group intent on constructing a state of their choosing.

Focusing on forces and movements rather than the actions of individuals propelled by belief and intention doesn't assist in understanding modern politics. Political actors are becoming *more* not *less* important.

The cover story of this edition of the *IPA Review* is intended to be more than just interesting. It is intended to demonstrate that politics matters.

All of Australia's 13 biggest mistakes was the product of a deliberate decision - sometimes by an individual, sometimes by a group. Most often the people responsible for the decision were politicians. In every case an alternative was available. History could have been different.

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The views of Louis XIV on Karl Marx have been lost to history.

