

From the Editor

Chris Berg

In the security scare that followed September 11, it became something of a sport for American news organisations to sneak prohibited items through airport screening security.

So when The Chaser—the Australian political satire group—loosely disguised themselves as the Canadian delegation convoy, and easily passed the security at APEC, it wasn't surprising. The media pounced on the incident—after all, not much else was happening of interest at APEC. *The Chaser's War on Everything*, when it aired the next week, achieved its highest ratings ever.

The Chaser is part of a genre of satirical news programs, which include the US's *The Daily Show* and its spin-off, *The Colbert Report* that are gathering loyalty from the apparently 'disengaged' youth demographic.

(It is conspicuous that the commentators who bemoan the Australia's 'disengaged' youth always assume that once they become engaged they will immediately become Left activists. But what if all those yoof got off their bed, put down their headphones, and *en masse* joined the Young Liberals?)

The popularity of satirical news programs with youth audiences has led some on the Left to view these programs as the saviour of democratic engagement. But satire is a double edged sword. It doesn't always do what you think does.

Some on the Left have cottoned on to the uncertain potential of satirical news. One piece last year in the *Boston Globe* was titled 'Why Jon Stewart Isn't Funny', and it argued that the host of *The Daily Show*, through his relentless satire of Washington buffoonery, encouraged political complacency.

The article claimed that *The Daily Show* leads audiences to adopt a 'holier than art thou attitude toward... national leaders' and undermined 'any remaining earnestness that liberals in America might still possess'.

Given the dreary sanctimony of so many of those in the American Left, if this is true then Jon Stewart does a fantastically important public service. But the *Boston Globe* writer is spot on. Satirical news programs display an extremely cynical attitude towards the political class.

After all, making fun of politicians is really easy, and fantastically rewarding. *The Colbert Report* and *The Chaser's War on Everything* are able to take advantage of the self-seriousness and cautious approach to the media that politicians harbour. Stephen Colbert, in his 'Better Know a District' interviews, successfully tricks junior politicians into making outlandish

statements. (*It was wrong to break the law to get people out of slavery—that's what **you** just said*)

And The Chaser is never funnier than when they are harassing humourless politicians at their press conferences.

*It was wrong to break the law to get people out of slavery—that's what **you** just said*

But Left politics relies on the heroic politician, blessed with intellect and political cunning, to enact policies in the 'national internet' for the betterment of 'society'. Cynicism about the type of people who choose to go in to politics

and the capabilities of government action does clash with the ongoing hunt in the left for the political saviour.

For this reason, The Chaser's jokes may seem fairly left-wing, but by undermining the sacred authority of the political class, satirical news tends to be more libertarian than socialist. A generation raised on cynicism and sarcasm are far less likely to jump on the bandwagon of a charismatic leader-type.

The *IPA Review* has been sceptical of governments, politicians, regulators and other self-appointed 'leaders' for sixty years, and this edition is no different.

Sinclair Davidson and Ken Phillips criticise the ideological baggage of the union movement, in teaching and construction respectively. Tim Wilson treats yet another call for a government petrol price inquiry with the contempt it deserves. Jennifer Marohasy and Alan Ashbarry decry the cultural divide of forest politics. And in our cover story, Nicholas Eberstadt stares directly into the eyes of the anti-natalists, and asks what they have against children.

Wolfgang Kasper reminds us that federalism is more than just anachronistic 'State's rights', as the Prime Minister seems to consider it. Instead, the principles of federalism are at the heart of liberal government. And Richard Allsop completes the thankless task of reading recent Prime Ministerial biographies, to try to discover more important things than the hometown of John Howard's grandfather.

There is, of course, the standard array of book reviews, complaints about regulation, personal digs at high-profile environmentalists, and references to Adam Smith that have made the *IPA Review* Australia's leading free market review of politics and public policy.

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From the Executive Director

John Roskam

The spate of massive advertising campaigns by the federal government has legitimately drawn criticism. Kevin Rudd recently commented that that is almost impossible to turn on the television without being bombarded by government advertising. What he didn't say is that advertising by state Labor governments is on a similar scale to that undertaken by the federal Coalition. No administration has been able to resist the temptation of taxpayer-funded advertising. To stop such advertising will take an act of will that is beyond the power of any politician.

There is another problem with government advertising. When government takes it upon itself to do the job of parents, or it tells parents how to bring up their children, the government undermines the fam-

ily. If you didn't care about the status of the family this wouldn't be a problem. Indeed entire political systems have been built on the basis that the state should replace the family. Plato's *Republic* attempted to create a model of social organisation in which biological parents had no role. Conservative governments are supposed to protect the family—and the Howard government is avowedly 'conservative'.

Two recent federal government advertising campaigns—replete with glossy brochures—deal with issues of legitimate community concern. One campaign is costing \$189 million. It is the *NetAlert—Protecting Australian Families Online* program. The other campaign is part of the government's \$1.4 billion *Tough on Drugs* initiative. It attempts to tell parents how to talk to their children about illicit drugs.

The ostensible reason for both campaigns is that they provide 'information' to parents. The difficulty is that in providing 'information' the government invariably makes value judgements about matters that are best left to the discretion of parents.

For example, the *NetAlert* campaign contains warnings on matters such as how to limit childrens' access to inappropriate online material, the dangers of 'cyber bullying', and internet fraud. Some of the information is so obvious as to be trite.

The *NetAlert* booklet informs parents that 'Personal information in the wrong hands can lead to online abuse' and 'Children are also vulnerable online scams'. Yes—children are vulnerable to online scams—and so are adults. Do we need the government to tell us this? Likewise, do we need the government to tell us that 'Hurtful comments and nasty rumours spread through text message or chat programs are just as damaging as those made in real life.'

Parents are advised in the *NetAlert* booklet that they should consider entering into a formal 'internet safety contract' which is agreed between parents and their children. This sounds suspiciously like the government telling parents how to raise their children.

Thankfully the government does at least acknowledge that 'values differ from individual to individual'.

Son, the government tells me the internet is dangerous!



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