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## **Gender, Politicians and Public Health: Using *The Simpsons* to Teach Politics**

### **Introduction:**

Recently, I gave a talk on the politics of *The Simpsons* to a group of 16-18 year old sixth form students in which I described Springfield, as I have done elsewhere, as being a model of a democracy and its challenges that teachers of politics could exploit to illustrate key themes in politics (Woodcock, 2006). Whilst giving this talk I suggested that the billionaire Mr Burns, the owner of Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, was the one person that prevented Springfield from being a democratic utopia.<sup>1</sup> Burns pollutes, sexually harasses his female employees (who are few and far between), has little to no regard for his employees health and has no civic concern whatsoever, as can be seen by his attempts to block out the sun from Springfield to ensure more people use power from his nuclear powers plant. His actions are in contrast to a local democratic society in which town meetings are regularly held to discuss (and decide upon) local affairs and indeed ordinary citizens of Springfield have ample access to the media to put across their views to influence debates in general. Also Springfield has abundant social capital as the townspeople regularly participate in societal events and organisations.

This description met with disapproval from one of the students listening to the paper who objected not to the idea that Springfield was a model of an almost ideal democratic society, but rather my assertion that the chief threat to it was Mr Burns. Instead she thought it was Mayor 'Diamond' Joe Quimby who posed the biggest threat to democracy in Springfield. Mr Burns, evil as he was, was not in a position of executive power in Springfield, whereas the corrupt and womanizing Quimby was, and this made him a bigger threat to democracy and good governance in Springfield. This then widened into a spontaneous and well informed group discussion about the various threats to democracy in Springfield.

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<sup>1</sup> All episode details from seasons 1 – 14 from either Richmond & Coffman (1997), Gimple (1999), McCann (2002) or McCann (2005). Thereafter from [http://www.thesimpsons.com/episode\\_guide/index.htm](http://www.thesimpsons.com/episode_guide/index.htm).

Indeed, a case can certainly be made against Quimby's suitability for high political office. He uses the city treasury to fund the murder of his enemies (*Krusty Gets Kancelled* 9F19), allows the local mobsters to provide rat milk instead of cow milk to the local school (*Mayored to the Mob* AABF05), is known from his endless womanizing, and even flees the town once when he (incorrectly) thinks his corruption has been uncovered (*They Saved Lisa's Brain* AABF18). Indeed when he is accused by right-wing talk radio host Birch Barlow of being an 'illiterate, tax-cheating, wife-swapping, pot-smoking spend-o-crat' during his election campaign against republican Sideshow Bob, he can only retort 'I am no longer illiterate.' (*Sideshow Bob Roberts* 2F02) Precisely who is the biggest threat to democracy in Springfield need not concern us here, but what should interest us is that a debate about the threats to democracy was brought about whilst discussing *The Simpsons*. It is that which shall be the focus of this paper, as it will suggest that knowledge of *The Simpsons* is so endemic amongst the generation that comprises the bulk of our undergraduate intake (or those who, in the case of outreach, are to become our intake) that we should attempt to make as much use of it as possible.

This article therefore suggests that much use can be made of *The Simpsons* by teachers of politics and specifically teachers of political theory and suggests a few ways teachers may do this. It will first attempt to justify why *The Simpsons* can be used for this purpose, and why it is more suitable than other TV programmes, before focusing on three political concepts that it is particularly useful for; namely gender, the nature of politicians and public health. Rather than simply highlighting areas, however, this article will give a few outlines of sessions that might be helpful to the teacher of politics.

### **Defence of *The Simpsons* as a teaching aid:**

The first full length episode of *The Simpsons* (*Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire* 7G08) was aired in the United States at Christmas 1989 (Turner, 2004, 19), in the United Kingdom it was shown the following year. An 18 year old first year undergraduate will have, therefore, been aware of *The Simpsons* throughout their conscious life; indeed it has formed part of the cultural backdrop to an entire generation's life. As I write this *The*

*Simpsons* are close to showing their 400<sup>th</sup> episode, a record for a full-length animated series (the next closest being *The Flintstones* on 166 episodes), and will release a feature film in the summer of 2007, and so are very much still in production. The longevity of the show is even more remarkable bearing in mind that it takes '300 people 8 months, at a cost of 1.5 million dollars, to make a single episode of *The Simpsons*.' (Irwin *et al*, 2001, 1) Evidence that the show has become a 'permanent feature' in the 'cultural landscape' of a generation (Turner, 2004, 5) seems to come from the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum's survey, which shows that whereas just 'one on a thousand' Americans can name all five First Amendment freedoms, 'more than one in five' can name all five Simpson family members (McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum, 2006, 7). This is compounded by age as the study also shows that 53% of 18-34 year olds could name all five Simpson family members, but none could name all five first amendment freedoms (McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum, 2006, 7). This, I suggest, is less worrying than it may at first seem as the teacher of politics can use students' knowledge of *The Simpsons* to start discussions that may lead to consideration of things such as human rights.

The *Simpsons* is no less popular in Great Britain, indeed a Channel 4 poll suggested that it was Britain's favourite animated programme of all time, beating *Tom and Jerry* into second place (BBC News, 2005). British celebrities have been in great demand to provide voices to one off characters, such as Patrick Stewart (*Homer the Great* 2F09), Jane Leeves (*The Regina Monologues* EABF22) and most recently Ricky Gervais who not only provided a guest voice, but also wrote an entire episode (*Homer Simpson, this is Your Wife* HABF08). Other British celebrities have appeared as themselves, such as Stephen Hawking (*They Saved Lisa's Brain* AABF18), Mick Jagger, Keith Richards and Elvis Costello (*How I spent my Strummer Vacation* DABF22), Roger Daltrey and John Entwistle (*A Tale of Two Springfield* BABF20), and Prime Minister Tony Blair (*The Regina Monologues* EABF22) who describes himself as 'a bit of a Simpson's addict.' (Quoted in Pinsky, 2001, 4)

*The Simpsons* is not unique in being a cartoon aimed at both children and adults, although it certainly invented this genre. Since the popularity of *The Simpsons* it has been joined by other feature length cartoons which include some level of social commentary such as *King of the Hill*, *South Park* and more recently *Family Guy* and *American Dad*. *The Simpsons* is certainly not alone in this genre in addressing issues of social and political concern. Singh (2002), for example, points out that *South Park* address issues such as tolerance of sexual orientation (218-219) and family breakdowns (220-221), to say nothing of the movie version when America declares war on Canada after a Canadian cartoon prompts children to mouth obscenities (221). He also suggests that cartoons are able to 'press the boundaries of what is politically acceptable far wider than would otherwise be the case.' (Singh, 2002, 217) Thus we should not be surprised that cartoons can tackle serious political problems, it is the very fact that they are cartoons, and therefore they seem more detached from reality, that they can tackle serious political issues. *The Simpsons* is also able to tackle political and social issues due to its multi referential nature in that its writers 'refer to, and make use of, a variety of differing artistic genres in the production of the show.' (Woodcock, 2006, 193)

The real difference between *The Simpsons* and the rest of its genre, I suggest, is that due to both the length and breadth of the program, that it has managed to build such a large 'cast' of characters and in so doing has created a model of society, and it is a model of society that most undergraduates will be aware of. Whereas Bugs Bunny 'may have played baseball before a stadium of indistinct oval squiggles', Springfield 'is alive with real and recognizable people in every crowd scene.' (Snow *et al*, 2001, 126-127) We know who teaches at Springfield Elementary School, who we are likely to find at Moe's Tavern and with whom Homer works. The more committed fan of the program might be able to tell you who the local newscaster is, who lives with Abe Simpson at his retirement home and who is a member of a team in the local bowling league. Springfield, therefore, due to its size provides us with a model of a political community, and one which, due to the sheer number of episodes of *The Simpsons* produced, is relatively well developed. We can use this political community to compare with our own, and see where it is more democratic than ours, and vice versa.

## **Gender:**

*The Simpsons* has attracted significant interest from politicians, journalists and academics alike, an interest that was perhaps sparked by George Bush Snr's comments that 'we need a nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons.' (Quoted in Pinsky, 2001, 5) In particular the role of *The Simpsons* in portraying a dysfunctional family has become particularly problematic. The academic literature, however, have suggested that far from being critical of the institution of the nuclear family (as George Bush Snr's comments suggest it might be), *The Simpsons* supports it. It was this point that was put forward by Paul A. Cantor (1999) in his seminal article that suggests that *The Simpsons* has an 'affirmative side and ends up celebrating the nuclear family as an institution.' (736) The show does not shy away from mocking the notion of the family, but nevertheless 'offers an enduring image of the nuclear family in the very act of satirizing it.' (Cantor, 1999, 737)

Homer, for example, is not a good role model for fathers, but unlike in many Hollywood produced television programs, he is present. Cantor suggests:

Homer is the distillation of pure fatherhood. Take away all the qualities that make for a genuinely good father – wisdom, compassion, even temper, selflessness – and what you have left is Homer Simpson with his pure, mindless, dogged devotion to his family. That is why for all his stupidity, bigotry, and self-centered quality, we cannot hate homer. He continually fails at being a good father, but he never gives up trying, and in some basic and important sense that makes him a good father. (1999, 739)

Another area of life portrayed in perhaps a conservative fashion by *The Simpsons* is its depiction of gender roles and sexual politics, in particular the characterisation of Marge Simpson, like many other women on the show whose 'main dramatic function' seems to be 'to understand, love, and clean up after her man.' (Snow *et al*, 2001, 131) Springfield

is depicted as being an overwhelmingly male society; with all principle positions of social advantage in the City (e.g. Mayor, Superintendent, Principle, and Police Chief etc.) being occupied by men. Indeed until the (relatively recent) introduction of Lindsey Naegle (*The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show* 4F12), Cookie Kwan (*Reality Bites* 5F06) and Judge Constance Harm (*The Parent Rap* CABF22), the only career women regularly appearing on *The Simpsons* were the teachers Mrs Hoover and Edna Krabappel, and Marge's sisters Patty and Selma who work at the Department of Motor Vehicles. None of these latter figures represent the feminist ideal; for example after failing an essay written by Lisa Simpson on Springfield's founding father entitled 'Jebediah Springfield: Superfraud', in which Lisa (correctly) accuses him of being a murderous pirate, Miss Hoover accuses the essay as being nothing but 'dead white male bashing from a P.C. thug', noting that it women like Lisa who 'keep the rest of us from landing a good husband.' (*Lisa the Iconoclast* 3F13)

So much for the supporting cast of *The Simpsons*, but what of the lead characters? Cantor describes Marge Simpson as 'very much the devoted mother and housekeeper' but one who 'often displays a feminist streak' (1999, 738), citing the episode when Marge goes off on a jaunt with Ruth Powers her next door neighbour à la *Thelma and Louise* (*Marge on the Lam* 1F03). There can be no doubt that Marge is both a devoted mother and housekeeper, however her feminist streaks appear few and far between since her marriage to Homer, although in flashback episodes we know that Marge displayed much academic and political potential. We know that she was a budding artist (*Brush With Greatness* 7F18), and a confident French tutor to her future husband (*The Way We Was* 7F12). Not only was Marge intelligent, but she also participated in (arguably stereotypical) women's activism in school, referring bras as 'man made shackles' prior to burning them (*The Way We Was* 7F12). Indeed such is Marge's potential that when Homer is considering committing adultery with Mindy, a work colleague, he is visited by his guardian angel who shows what life would be like if he married Mindy rather than Marge. In this vision, it suggests that Marge would be the President of the United States of America had she not married him (*The Last Temptation of Homer* 1F07). Instead Marge is such an overwork and undervalued housewife that she suffers a nervous

breakdown (*Homer Alone* 8F14), and loses much of her hair through stress (*Simpsoncalifragilisticexpiala(Annoyed Grunt)cious* 3G03).

Marge Simpson does not work, as is the case with all the married women on *The Simpsons*, and as a consequence 'the drama of her life usually unfolds within the confines of the house' (Snow *et al*, 2001, 133).<sup>2</sup> Her ability to put up with the stupidity and selfishness of Homer knows no bounds. For example when Homer apologises for ruining the holiday after he ended up in Gaol in a visit to London by telling Marge that he should have 'listened to whatever it was you were saying', she meekly replies that 'it's partly my fault. I've been nagging you so much on this trip; you couldn't know which nags to focus on.' (*The Regina Monologues* EABF22) Are we taking this presentation of Marge Simpson's life to literally, and is it in fact a parody of the housewife's role, aimed at satirizing gender roles rather than reflect or support them? In a sense this must be true, as no-one could accept Homer's behaviour with regards to Marge as acceptable. Indeed the point of the show is satire. However Snow *et al* (2001) point out gender and the family 'does not come in for anything like the skewering bestowed on other targets.' (140) As such, Marge's role does not fulfill the role of satire to the same extent that, say Mr Burns does:

[S]atire, by its very nature, requires that we take an all-too-familiar cultural convention (capitalism, religion, motherhood...) and exaggerate its most salient characteristics to a very great degree, thereby revealing absurdities latent within the cultural convention itself, but then revealed through the satiric exaggeration of that convention or idea. The character of Marge does not exaggerate motherhood, wifehood, or femininity nearly to the extent that the character of Burns exaggerates and lampoons capitalism, or the Reverend Lovejoy satirizes postmodern religion. Burns takes capitalism to its logical conclusions and reveals it to be a barren way of life. Marge, by contrast, does not take the conventions she embodies to their logical conclusions, she does not exaggerate them grossly, and she certainly does not reveal them to be vacuous or superficial. (Snow *et al*, 2001, 141)

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<sup>2</sup> Marge does go to work in the Nuclear Powers Plant in *Marge Gets a Job* (9F05) where she is sexually harassed by Mr Burns, and becomes a police officer in *The Springfield Connection* (2F21) and an estate agent in *Reality Bites* (5F06). She also sets up her own pretzel business in *The Twisted World of Marge Simpson* (4F08), acts as a substitute teacher in *The PTA Disbands* (2F19) and volunteers as a counsellor at the local church in *In Marge we Trust* (4F18). Marge is, however, always back home or unemployed by the end of the episode (Snow *et al*, 2001, 134).

Consequently it can be argued that *The Simpsons* presents us with a conservative view of gender roles when examining Marge's position in the family; however a possible antidote exists in the depiction of Lisa Simpson. Lisa is almost certainly the most intelligent member of *The Simpson* household. She is musical and plays the saxophone, she is a straight A student (with the possible exception of Gym), but not only is she intelligent, but she also takes a stand on civil and political issues, and shows considerable independent thinking from her family and the society around her. She takes a stand against Homer when he gets his TV hooked up to cable illegally, declaring it stealing (*Homer Vs. Lisa and the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment* 7F13), she exposes political corruption at Washington when on an essay writing trip (*Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington* 8F01), takes on the sexist assumptions of her Malibu Stacy dolls (*Lisa Vs. Malibu Stacy* 1F12) and is a committed vegetarian (*Lisa The Vegetarian* 3F03), and Buddhist (*She of Little Faith* DABF02), as well as being a member of Mensa and a regular contributor to the local media (*They Saved Lisa's Brain* AABF18). Lisa should be careful, however, that she does not go the way of prior young achiever J.S. Mill, as we know that Lisa suffers from stress that she treats not with Wordsworth's poetry, but with new age treatments (*Make Room For Lisa* AABF12). Great things are in store for Lisa, as episodes set in the future suggest that she will go to University (*Lisa's Wedding* 2F15), (indeed she manages to attend the local university for a period of time without anyone noticing that she is only 8 years old (*Little Girl in the Big Ten* DABF15)) and we also know that eventually she will become the president of the United States of America (*Bart to the Future* BABF13).

However whereas Lisa provides a clear alternative female role model to Marge (and indeed most of the female characters of *The Simpsons*), she suffers for it and is constantly criticized by the others in Springfield. Ned Flanders once says of her 'do I hear the sound of butting in? It's gotta be little Lisa Simpson! Springfield's answer to a question no one asked' (*Hurricane Neddy* 4F07). Even Lisa's teachers only encourage her to a certain degree, as her permanent record says that Lisa has a 'tendency towards know-it-all-ism' (*Skinner's Sense of Snow* CAB06). Indeed there is in Springfield, as Homer discovers when he has a crayon removed from his nose that increases his intelligence dramatically, 'a distinct strain of ant-intellectualism' (*HOMR* BABF22). Lisa agreed, and pointed out

to Homer, that ‘as intelligence goes up, happiness often goes down.’ Lisa, therefore, is not supported in her dreams and aspirations.

So there is much in Springfield that can be used by the teacher of politics to raise discussion about the role of women in society in the juxtaposition of Lisa and Marge as female role models, and in the depiction of Springfield as a male dominated society in general. Below is an exercise that may help to structure such discussion:

### **Figure One: Gender in Springfield Exercise**

Perhaps try this as an introductory session on Gender roles at either foundation level, or as an outreach session. Perhaps you should warn participants of this activity and ask them to watch a few episodes of *The Simpsons* in preparation.

#### Task One:

Ask each student to mention one thing that either Marge did that represented a traditional understanding of a woman’s role in society.

#### Task Two:

Split the students into two groups (or more if numbers allow) to prepare a poster describing the personalities of Marge Simpson on the one hand, and Lisa Simpson on the other.

#### Task Three:

In general discussion, compare the posters. Link them to the discussion of gender in *The Simpsons* above. Ask them which character they find more positive and why.

#### Task Four:

Conclude the session by linking it with a short lecture on broader issues relating to gender roles in society.

### ***The Simpsons* and politicians:**

On the face of it, *The Simpsons* seems critical of all politicians be they real or fictional, and real politicians are dealt with in an even-handed manner, in that the politicians of no party seem to get an easier ride than another. For example, Lisa Simpson writes to President Clinton to complain when her school band are denied first place at a state fair contest when the Ogdenville's school band use coloured glow sticks to enhance their performance, contrary to the competitions rules (*Saddlesore Galactica* BABF09). President Clinton appears at the end of the episode, having overturned the band competition results, claiming that Lisa has taught kids a valuable lesson; 'if things don't go your way, just keep complaining until your dreams come true.' Marge retorts that this is a 'pretty lousy lesson', to which Clinton responds 'I'm a pretty lousy president.' George Bush Snr is lambasted, probably due to his comments on the programme, in an episode where he moves in across the street from the Simpson family (*Two Bad Neighbors* 3F09), and finally ends up spanking Bart due to his (alleged) bad behaviour, leading to a feud between Homer and George Bush Snr. In this episode, George Bush Snr goes to the drive-thru window at Krustyburger, and suggests that a Krustry burger 'doesn't sound too appetizing' before asking what 'kind of stew' they have today. As Cantor (1999) points out, the show is 'unwilling to forego any opportunity for humour', and as a result its writers have been 'generally evenhanded over the years in making fun of both [American] parties, and of both the Right and the Left.' (735) Indeed it is this ability to deal with political messages even handedly which leads conservative politicians to claim *The Simpsons* for their own, due to the perceived liberal nature of most Hollywood output. 'Against the backdrop of conventional sitcoms' even-handedness makes *The Simpsons* 'damn near reactionary' according to Jonah Goldberg, editor of the conservative publication the *National Review*. 'If '50 percent of the jokes are aimed leftward, that's 49.5 percent more than we usually get.' (Goldberg, 2000)

The Springfield politicians do not fare much better than their real life counterparts. We have seen above that Mayor 'Diamond' Joe Quimby is portrayed as a corrupt, womanising and only recently literate politician. He is also a politician that frequently looks for easy answers to policy making. When Quimby, after much public pressure,

introduces a bear patrol after a bear wanders into Springfield, he raises taxes in order to pay for it. When he faces criticism for doing this, speaking to his aide he asks are 'these morons getting dumber or just louder' when he realises they want the bear patrol, but do not wish to pay for it (*Much Apu About Nothing* 3F20). In order to placate the townspeople Quimby suggests that the tax hike was not, in fact, due to the bear patrol, but rather it was due to illegal immigration. So he is perfectly willing to let a group of people suffer in order to protect his political career.

The only challenge that Quimby has faced to his mayoralty was from Sideshow Bob, who runs for mayor shortly after being released from prison for the attempted murder of Bart Simpson (*Sideshow Bob Roberts* 2F02). When elected, Sideshow Bob reek his revenge on Bart and Lisa who spearheaded Quimby's campaign by directing the erection of a new expressway through the Simpson's home. In his run for mayor, however, Lisa and Bart notice that those registered to vote included the dead, and not only dead people, but also dead pets. Consequently, one could conclude that politicians, both real and fictional, are not portrayed in a positive manner.

However perhaps it is not politicians as such that are criticised, but rather high profile and corrupt politicians that are criticised; and *The Simpsons* often subtly make a distinction between politicians who quietly do their jobs and more high profile politicians. On one occasion Montgomery Burns stands for election as state governor. He runs, however, simply because his nuclear power plant is threatened with closure unless he cleans up his plant, and he thinks that if he becomes the governor he could change the law and keep his plant open the way it is now (*Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish* 7F01). In order to win the election, Burns surrounds himself with apparatchiks of every type; a speech writer, a joke writer, a spin doctor, a make-up man, a personal trainer, a muckraker, a character assassin, a mudslinger and a garbologist. Mary Bailey, the incumbent and Burn's opponent, however, is not portrayed in a negative manner any stage in *The Simpsons*. Whereas Burn's is portrayed in a negative manner, it is him and his reasons for running for governor are mocked, this is not a critique of politicians as a whole.

Perhaps the biggest contrast between an honest, hard working politician and someone who represents all that is bad in politics comes when Homer stands for election for (and indeed is elected as) Springfield's sanitation commissioner (*Trash of the Titans* 5F09). Homer, after getting in a wholly avoidable argument with the sanitation workers (calling them 'trash-eating stinkbags'), has his garbage disposal cut off. He refuses to apologise so that his garbage collection may recommence, and when he finds out that Marge has sent a letter of apology to Ray Patterson, Springfield's sanitation commissioner, Homer storms off to city hall to rescind it. Whereas Homer is met with courtesy and respect by Ray Patterson, Homer wants to 'fight city hall', and decides to run for sanitation commissioner; he claims to be a 'crusader for the little guy', but in fact his campaign is nasty, with Homer cutting Ray Patterson's brake wires, accusing him of being an alcoholic and telling electors that Patterson 'lured children into... [his] gingerbread house.' To which Homer replies in a shocked manner, 'yeah, that was just a lie.' Homer runs on the platform of 'Can't Someone Else Do It', suggesting that people should no longer have to take rubbish and put it in their bins, but that the garbage men should do this. Indeed Homer plans to expand Garbage Collectors role to doing citizens domestic cleaning. Homer is elected, but wholly unprepared for the reality of politics and in an attempt to deliver on his election promises, he spends an entire year budget in a year, blaming this on the fact that they let him sign checks with a stamp. He spends money on new uniforms for the garbagemen, however they strike when they fear not being paid, leaving Homer looking for an alternative means of income. He finds one, in allowing other cities to dump their rubbish in the mines beneath Springfield, which results in rubbish spewing up through the ground to such a degree that they have to move the entire town five miles down the road. Prior to moving Springfield, the town ask Ray Patterson back, an offer which he refuses replying simply that it is gratifying 'to leave you wallowing in the mess you've made.'

Homer, therefore, is portrayed as being all that (many would regard as being) wrong with politicians in that he lies, makes promises in elections without being able to pay for them later and produces a character assassination on his opponent. Ray Patterson, on the other

hand, is seen as being a quiet and efficient public servant who gets the job done. His final election address indeed is simply ‘if you want an experienced public servant, vote for me. But if you want to believe a bunch of crazy promises about garbagemen cleaning your gutters and waxing your car, then by all means vote for this sleazy lunatic.

This episode could be used by teachers of politics to highlight the fact that any city/government needs revenue to provide the services it is committed to, and if it runs short of money it needs to raise taxes, sell assets or drop services (rather than fill mines with rubbish). Below is an exercise that might help crystallise thought on this issue:

### **Figure Two: Promises, Promises, Promises**

Ask students to watch *Trash of the Titans*, and list the promises he makes, and then tackle the following questions in group discussion in preparation for them to report back:

#### Task One:

Why does Homer struggle to implement the proposals he puts forward?

#### Task Two:

What does this tell you about the nature of politics?

#### Task Three:

Homer makes money by getting other cities rubbish dumped in mines under Springfield, which in turn causes Springfield to be moved. Bearing in mind neither of these proposals are practical for most cities, what would they do if they ran short of money?

### **Marge’s Springfield Dinners:**

An interesting episode takes place in season 13, which could be used to start discussions of precisely what the state should, and should not do with regards to public health for the politics teacher. In particular the episode entitled *Sweet and Sour Marge* (DABF03) can

be used to start discussions on Mill's Harm Principle and the nanny state. The episode starts with Homer's attempts to get Springfield into the 'Duff Book of World Records', following his discovery of this book. He tries to make the townspeople make the largest human pyramid, which fails when the pyramid falls, with the people (luckily as it happens) landing on a weigh station. This accident reveals that Springfield is in fact the fattest city in the world; a fact met with glee by the population as it means that they enter the record books after all, with Diamond Joe Quimby leading the celebration declaring Springfield 'Fat City, USA'.

Marge, who is used to public campaigning and who, indeed, briefly succeeded in getting violence banned from the cartoon *Itchy and Scratchy (Itchy and Scratchy & Marge 7F09)*, wonders if this is such a good thing. When she finds out that most of the food in Springfield is made by the Motherloving Sugar Company and, as the name suggests, contains a lot of sugar, she decides to take action. Indeed the extent of the sugar domination extends to 'honey-glazed cauliflower' and 'choco-blasted baby aspirin'. When she asks that the Motherloving Sugar Company put less sugar in their food, her request is met simply with the sarcastic 'hum. That'll boost sales.' Therefore, with the market option denied to her, Marge turns to law and, perhaps surprisingly, manages to get Judge Snyder to ban all sugar products from Springfield. Judge Snyder in fact declares that it is 'Hershey Highwaymen' like Garth Motherloving of the Motherloving Sugar Company 'that made me fat.'

'Marge's law', as it becomes known, is certainly good for the health, indeed Marge declares she is doing this 'to make this a healthier place to live', It is not popular with her own family, however, with them calling her 'Erin Choco-snitch'. Indeed Homer and Bart engage in illegal sugar smuggling, an act encouraged by even Lisa when she realises that her dessert consists of steamed limes. When the smuggling goes wrong, and the sugar load is dumped in Springfield Docks, the townspeople dive into the sugary water to get a sweet fix. Indeed even Judge Snyder jumps into the water declaring that his ban in fact exceeded his authority, leaving Marge to muse that 'you just can't use the law to nag.'

The idea that in Springfield a law was passed to help public health, which banned something popular, could be made great use of in political theory teaching.

In particular this episode could be used to discuss the pros and cons of J.S. Mill's 'Harm Principle', the proposition that 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised' over anyone is 'to prevent harm to others.' (1993, 78) Mill makes it clear that you are not able to ban any behaviour for their 'own good, either physical or moral' (1993, 78) so we should assume that Mill would oppose 'Marge's Law' as it is aimed at stopping people doing something which, although is bad for them, does not harm others. Had Springfield banned people selling sugar products to children, that would have been acceptable as the harm principle applies only to human beings 'in the maturity of their faculties' (1993, 78), but to ban the sale of sugar products completely to children and adults alike would have been unacceptable whatever the benefit such a ban would have been to public health. Below is a way you could lead discussions around these issues.

### **Figure Three: To Ban or Not to Ban**

Watch *Sweet and Sour Marge* soon after a session on J.S. Mill's harm principle, and do the following tasks:

Split your group of students into two smaller groups (or more if possible)

Task one:

Ask the students to list the justifications given by Marge for banning sugar products in Springfield.

Task two:

Then ask students to paraphrase what can and cannot be banned by the state according to Mill's Harm Principle.

Task three:

Ask students what they think Mill would have thought of 'Marge's Law'. Also ask them what they think of Marge's law.

Task four:

Ask each group of students to come up with an example of a contemporary issue that is similar to Marge's Law.

Task five:

Conclude with a brief summary of session.

**Conclusion:**

This article has not been an attempt to show that *The Simpsons* contains a specific political message, but rather that because of its nature and longevity, that it can be used by teachers of politics as a means to start discussion about political matters. Specifically it has outlined discussions regarding gender, the nature of politicians and public health that occur in this remarkable programme, and suggested a few activities that may be of use to link *The Simpsons* to broader political and societal themes.

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