

# Wheelin' around



by Charlie Moore

Over the past two years, despite a great increase in automobile population, Australia's highway death rate has been steadily declining. This is interesting because Australia has not adopted the "crashproof tank" style of safety legislation which has failed to make much of a dent in the fatality rate here in North America.

Unlike the Ralph Nader inspired 5 M.P.H. bumpers, warning buzzers, and heavily padded interiors etc., forced upon us by the American government, Australia has merely introduced two sensible laws; the compulsory use of seatbelts by all passengers, and the lowering of the legal limit for blood-alcohol content to 0.05 (versus our 0.08).

While the American government continues to insist that all new cars be equipped with the controversial and probably dangerous airbags by 1976, Australia has intelligently legislated the utilization of a crash restraint system which most cars already have installed. The system has been thoroughly tested in actual crash situations, and is more effective in all types of crashes than the airbag.

It is obvious that our laws are much too lenient, as at least 50 percent of highway deaths are still directly attributable to alcohol. Part of our problem here is lack of efficient enforcement, but stiffer laws would still be nothing but a step forward. It seems to me that it

would be infinitely more intelligent to attack the traffic safety problem in the same manner that Australia has done rather than putting us all in underpowered padded cells as the American Government seems determined to do.

One bright note is that the new boss of the U.S. Department of Transport is reputed to be an automotive enthusiast. His name is Claude S. Brinegar and he is a vice-president of Union Oil of California and is also on the Board of Directors of the Daytona International Speedway. A Porsche owner, Mr. Brinegar will be quite a change from John Volpe who was

former head of the D.O.T. and a supporter of the Ralph Nader school of thought pertaining to auto safety.

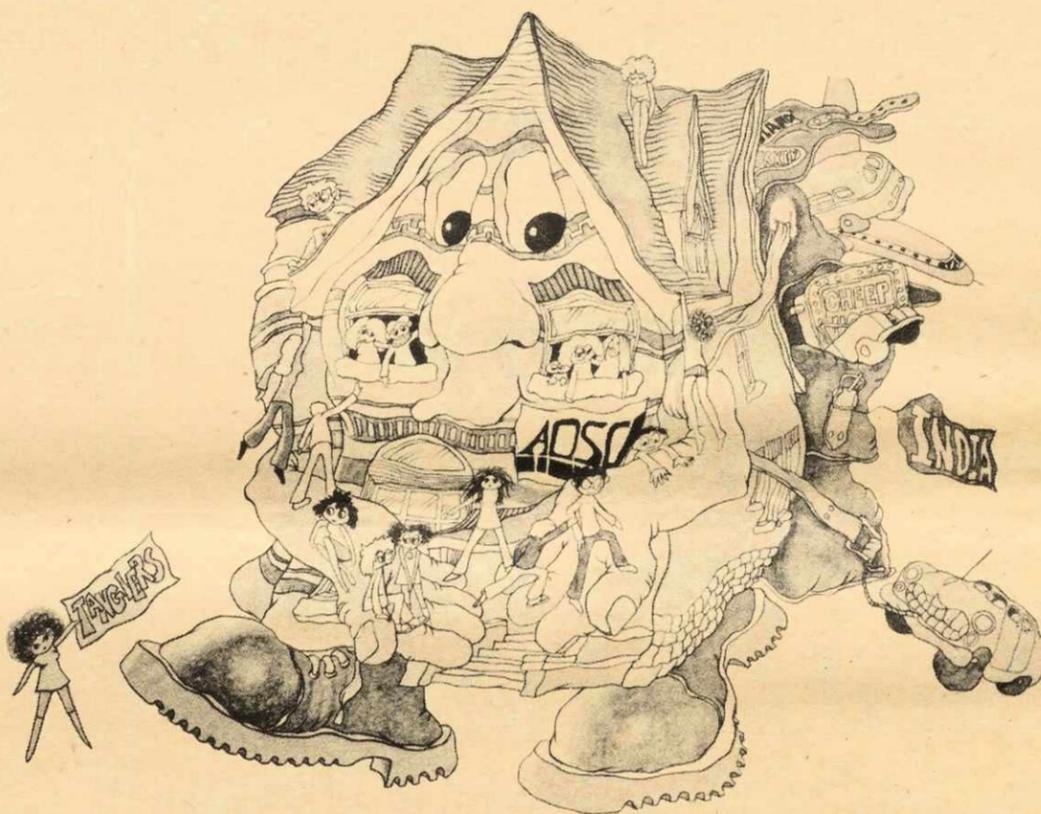
Since Brinegar's appointment, the pace of new legislation has slowed considerably at the D.O.T., and some of the new legislation which has gone through actually makes sense, such as the exemption of small carmakers (less than 1000 units per year) from most of the smog/safety legislation. The possibility of having to meet these regulations had threatened to bankrupt several of these small manufacturers.

If you don't like the looks of

the 1973 cars with their protruding bumpers, you will probably like the 1974's even less. Protection requirements for bumpers will be increased for 1974, so the bumpers are going to be bigger and heavier. Bumper height is also required to be uniform next year regardless of car size so effectively everything from Cadillacs to Volkswagens must have their bumpers at the same height, an interesting challenge for the stylists.

It is possible that 1973 will be the last year that it will be possible to buy a half-decent new car for some time. In the next three years at least, cars

are going to get progressively heavier, slower, less economical, bulkier, uglier and harder to drive. Up to now, smog and safety legislation has crept up on us and changes to automobiles have been so slow that they have been hardly noticed. However, the 1974, '75 and '76 models promise to be so miserable that it is hard to imagine no great consumer outcry. The curator of one major U.S. transportation museum has recently bought a large stock of 1972 cars because he believes that '72 was the last good year for cars, period! Get them while they last folks, and keep wheelin'.



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