

Government's role should be to increase happiness and reduce misery. Policy analysis must be recast to reflect outcomes in terms of changes to happiness.

Happiness and well-being are central to every part of our lives, but how do we become happier as a society? Ahead of an LSE Centre for Economic Performance public debate, [Richard Layard](#) argues that the best societies are those with the most happiness and the least misery, and that public policy should be made on this basis.



A fundamental cultural change is underway in Britain: we are beginning to think that the purpose of life and of government might be the well-being of the people rather than the creation of wealth. Similar subversive ideas are growing in other rich countries, but they are more advanced in Britain than elsewhere. Everybody now knows that we are no happier than we were sixty years ago, despite massive wealth-creation. So politicians of all parties talk about well-being, including the Prime Minister. And there are civil service divisions that deal with it, and policies that can be traced to it.

But even in Britain the idea lacks a clear philosophical focus, and a corresponding cultural organisation to promote it. So let me talk first about those two issues, and then look at the current political scene and ask how well it matches to the challenge.

Philosophy

We are talking about nothing less than the purpose of human life. In the 18th century Enlightenment in Britain and the USA there were two key beliefs.

- The first said that the best state of society was where there was the most happiness and the least misery. That was the fundamental proposition of political philosophy – the lodestar for government. As Thomas Jefferson said, “The care of life and happiness is the sole legitimate objective of government”.
- Corresponding to this was the basic proposition of moral philosophy – that the right way to live is to create the most happiness and the least misery that you can in the world around you. That was the lodestar for moral action.

These ideas were never accepted by all thinking people and they appeared difficult to implement if we knew so little about the causes of happiness. But due to major scientific progress we now know a lot more. And, equally important, the old religious sanctions for morality no longer convince most Europeans and there is a desperate need for a rational, secular basis for morality – and for a political philosophy consistent with it. So the two ideas I have described should be the basic foundations of 21st century culture.

But there are critics – some friendly fire and some less friendly. So let me quickly discuss nine issues.

- **What is happiness?** Happiness is a **feeling** and there is a spectrum running from extreme happiness at one end to extreme misery at the other. Happiness is feeling good and enjoying your life and wanting to go on that way. Unhappiness is feeling bad and wanting things to change. We are interested not in temporary highs but in the total of each person's happiness in life.
- **Why is happiness uniquely important?** We can list all kinds of goods we value: health, freedom, accomplishment, wealth and so on. But for each we can ask why we value it, and we can have a reasoned discussion. For example, health is good because sickness makes you feel dreadful. Or freedom is good because oppression makes you feel awful. But if we ask why it matters if we feel bad, there is no answer. It is self-evident. It is basic to the way we are, as humans. This was why the Enlightenment thinkers, including Jefferson, thought as they did.
- **But won't talk of happiness encourage selfishness?** On the contrary, both propositions say the exact opposite. They say that because everybody wants to be happy, everybody's happiness should count equally when we are deciding what to do. So in [Action for Happiness](#) we ask members to pledge to try to create as much happiness and as little unhappiness as they can in the world around them.
- **But isn't this utopian?** I don't think so. There are two sides to our nature – there's certainly an

egoistic side but there's also an altruistic side which enjoys helping other people. When people do good, they feel good, and brain science confirms this – the brain 'lights up' in the same areas as when people get other rewards like chocolate.

So the job of culture is to promote the altruistic side over the egoistic side. Unfortunately our excessively individualistic culture tends if anything to do the opposite. But cultural trends can be reversed. The 18th century was increasingly individualistic, while the 19th century saw increasing social responsibility. We don't want a new Victorian era based on the fear of hellfire. But we do want a culture of greater caring based on reason and on the new science of happiness, which provides so much more evidence on what really makes people happy.

- **But isn't happiness a by-product?** J.S. Mill argued just this, and of course we should not be asking ourselves if we are happy all the time. But we certainly should think a great deal about whether other people are happy – they won't become happy if we think of their happiness as a by-product. And sometimes, if we're discontented, we should think about how we could become more contented ourselves, and use some of the evidence to become so.
- **But what about fairness?** How exactly should we think about other people? Where does fairness come in? Fairness is about the way in which happiness is distributed. If we care about fairness, we should pay more attention to reducing misery than to increasing the happiness of people who are already happy. This point was overlooked by Bentham, but it should apply to us individually and to the practice of government.
- **The role of government?** Governments have of course always been interested in lots of things besides economic growth. They have been concerned with the relief of misfortune and with producing peaceful, civilised communities. But it's now more obvious than before that a happier society will require government to care increasingly about the values which children acquire in school, about mental health and more generally how people behave to each other.

When the [first edition of my book](#) on happiness came out, it attracted mostly favourable reviews, but two were very critical. One was called [The Bureaucrats of Bliss](#) and the other [The Happiness Police](#). But putting happiness first would never lead to a police state because freedom is one of the basic determinants of happiness.

- **But can happiness be measured?** It can. You can ask people how happy they are and you will find that their answers are well-correlated with what you would expect, both with likely causes of happiness (like finding a job) and likely consequences (like quitting one). They are also correlated with what your friends report and with objective measurements of electrical activity in the relevant parts of the brain.
- **But is happiness fluffy?** No. It is the basic aspiration of every human being. It is what we most want for our children. And it is the theme of much of the world's greatest literature.

So the two propositions with which I began have strong philosophical foundations. What do they imply for the actions of individuals and of government?

Individuals

It is best to start with individuals, because unless individuals have good values it is difficult to see why they would elect a government that acted well. So we want individuals to derive their happiness as far as possible from contributing to the happiness of others. As Aristotle saw so clearly, people will only behave virtuously out of habit – because this is the way you have grown up to behave from an early age. It is also much more likely if you belong to an organisation of like-minded people committed to the same way of living and drawing strength from it.

That is why Geoff Mulgan, Anthony Seldon and I have launched a movement called Action for Happiness. There is clearly a hunger out there – people who feel that life could be better if collectively they dared more often to express their better selves.

Our hope is they will form local groups, with common beliefs which they discuss and which they put into practical action in whatever way makes sense to them. Thus the movement's website offers 10 keys to happier living (fundamental principles) and 50 actions on which groups can draw in deciding how to implement their beliefs. For each action an evidence base is provided, which shows what improvements it may lead to. The actions run from very private, like learning to meditate, to actions in your family or your workplace, to actions within the realms of community and politics.

The movement is totally non-political, with members from all parties and none. But, if we want a happier society, some things have to be done by governments.

The role of government

If a government is to promote happiness and reduce misery, it needs an information base. It needs to measure the happiness of the population – not the average, but the full range of happiness and misery. And then it needs to understand the causes of these outcomes. This should become the chief mission of the [Economic and Social Research Council](#). Under Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph, wealth-creation was made the Council's central focus. It should be replaced by well-being.

And then this understanding needs to be applied to policy choice. This means a radical re-casting of policy analysis. At present the main method is cost-benefit analysis where benefits are measured in pounds, based on willingness-to-pay as shown by revealed preference in the presence of choice. But this method cannot capture the outcomes of most forms of public expenditure like health, law and order, child protection, elderly care and poor relief, since choice throws little light on how people value better health, safer streets, happier children, and more contented elderly and deprived people. For these objectives the outcome must be measured in terms of changes in happiness and misery. To devise these methods is now a major challenge.

Britain today

So how does our situation in Britain match to this challenge? We are doing well, compared with most other countries. Our central government departments for domestic policy have well-being divisions, though their voice is not always decisive. Our Cabinet Secretary is a passionate supporter. Many of our local governments are equally interested and three of them participated energetically in the Young Foundation's Local Well-being Project. And in 2009 the Office for National Statistics adopted the measurement of well-being as one of its three main areas of development, partly in response to the impressive leads in this area from the OECD and from President Sarkozy. Ministers agreed with this initiative.

At the political level, party leaders of all three major political parties support the importance of well-being. It is a non-party-political issue – and in all parties there are also many critics. But one must pay particular tribute to David Cameron for his stalwart advocacy of the idea. In 2006 he made a famous [speech](#) in which he said, "It's time we admitted there's more to life than money, and it's time we focussed not just on GDP but on GWB – General Well-Being". Since becoming Prime Minister he has officially requested the ONS to measure the well-being of the nation in an authoritative way and to include the results in the nation's "official statistics". Britain will be the first country to do this; and the results will begin coming out in Summer 2012.

When he launched this initiative, the Prime Minister said "We have got to recognise, officially, that economic growth is a means to an end. If your goal in politics is to help make a better life for people – which mine is... then you have got to take practical steps to make sure government is properly focused on our quality of life as well as economic growth." No other head of government has gone further towards establishing the quality of life as the objective of his government.

For fundamental political debate, this is an exciting time. The old mantra of wealth-creation as the goal of life and government is over. The new gospel of well-being is there to be adopted. Action for Happiness is happy to play its part. But it is up to the political class to make it a reality.

This article previews the LSE Centre for Economic Performance public debate:

Is Happiness the Right Measure of Social Progress?

Professor Lord Robert Skidelsky & Professor Lord Richard Layard

Overview: In his book *Happiness* (recently updated), Richard Layard argues that the best societies are those with the most happiness and the least misery. Public policy should be made on this basis. [Robert Skidelsky](#) has many reservations. They debate the issue

Time: Tuesday 18 October 2011, 6.30 – 8.00pm

Venue: Old Theatre, LSE Old Building, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE

This event is free and open to all. For more information on attending, please visit the [LSE events web page](#).