

Happiness: Getting Our Priorities Right by Mark Williamson

□ There is a vitally important shift underway in how we think about progress. Growing numbers of economists, political leaders and expert commentators are calling for better measures of how well society is doing; measures that track not just our economic standard of living, but our overall quality of life. This shift also mirrors the way many of us are feeling too: that the modern consumer economy has failed to deliver fair outcomes and fulfilling lives.

□ In recent decades our lives have become increasingly orientated in the service of the economy, rather than the other way around. Yet economic growth is really just a means to an end; it only matters if it contributes to social progress and human wellbeing. And the tragedy is that decades of growth and material progress have failed to deliver a measurable increase in life satisfaction.

□ When prime minister David Cameron announced that he was asking the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to start measuring the UK's national wellbeing, this was greeted with derision and eye-rolling in the media. Critics suggested that it was a cynical attempt to distract us from our economic woes, or simply a waste of money at a time when there are more important things to worry about.

□ These concerns are understandable, but misplaced. It is of course difficult to trust a government that claims a commitment to wellbeing while simultaneously slashing funding for public services that contribute to it. But to see this only through a political lens would be to miss the point. Focusing on wellbeing isn't a distraction, it's about finding out what will really improve people's lives and then acting on it, which is surely what good government should be all about?

□ For the very first time the UK is now officially measuring and valuing people's subjective feelings about their lives. This isn't some Orwellian nightmare where we're forced to be happy with our lot; in fact it's quite the opposite. It is an opportunity for government to listen to how we're feeling and learn what we value most. Over time it could lead to a greater focus on initiatives that are good for people's wellbeing, and recognition that these aren't always the same as what's good for growing the economy.

□ So what did we learn from the initial publication of ONS wellbeing data in December 2011? Despite all the economic doom and gloom, it seems that more than three quarters of people rated their overall life satisfaction as seven or more out of ten.

□ Countries like Denmark and Canada however, consistently score above eight out of ten for average life satisfaction, so we could be doing better. More worryingly, 8% of people rated their life satisfaction as less than 5 out of 10. This is a very low life satisfaction score,

similar to average scores in countries like Bangladesh and Cambodia.

□Most worryingly of all, 27% of the population recorded high levels of anxiety. Some of this may relate to the economic climate, but much of it undoubtedly reflects the enormous pressure that people are under in our increasingly competitive society. Many who appear successful in outward, material terms are actually suffering serious emotional and psychological trauma.

□Understanding these findings and what drives them should be a top priority for policy makers. Evidence suggests that a focus on wellbeing might lead to a greater emphasis on promoting good mental health; putting economic stability before economic growth; teaching life skills in schools; and supporting families in need – particularly young children in their formative years. For example, at a local level, a council considering the closure of a library or play area to make way for a new commercial development might act differently.

□But perhaps most importantly, rethinking what we prioritise also has implications for each of us as individuals. The self-centred values that have accompanied our quest for economic growth have encouraged too many of us to put our financial success ahead of concerns for the wellbeing of our families, our communities and even ourselves.

□We too can benefit from a shift in priorities and a recognition that real happiness is less about what we earn or own and more about our relationships and state of mind; it's as much about what we can contribute as what we can get for ourselves. A happier society starts with each of us.

□Getting to a society where as many people as possible are flourishing and as few people as possible are unhappy, requires both policy and social change. If politicians are to be criticised, it should be for failing to improve people's wellbeing not for wanting to measure it. But let's also recognise that we can all play our part in helping create a happier society.

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