# The politics of well-being

Hetan Shah

Hetan Shah *argues that the politics of well-being contains powerful insights which can inform the left across a range of issues, but there are also potential pitfalls.*

It is impossible to read the newspapers each week without stumbling across a new survey on what makes us happy or on which city has the best quality of life. Odd to think, then, that the term 'quality of life' didn't even exist until around fifty years ago, and research shows it had not made it into the dictionaries as late as 1978.

The question of what promotes well-being is galvanising interest much more widely than the occasional surfacing of a survey - often dodgy - in the press. (As usual it is worth looking out for the sponsor. A recent survey sponsored by a travel agent found that holidays made us happy.) Well-being is being taken seriously as a force to inform our politics. The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (very quietly) produced a paper on the topic of life satisfaction in 2002. At the new economics foundation we produced a *Well-being Manifesto* in 2004. Lord Layard has recently produced a book on the subject of *Happiness*. And in March 2005 the UK government committed to measuring well-being in its new sustainable development strategy. Is happiness politics a trivial middle-class diversion which signals how moribund our political discourse has become? Or is there anything of real value in the politics of well-being? I will argue that the politics of well-being does have the power to be a transformative political force, and has much to offer the left, but that there are also a number of pitfalls

that will need to be dealt with.

But, to begin, where has this well-being politics come from? Of course all political philosophies have had more or less implicit conceptions of the good life, so in some ways there is nothing new in this. What informs the current debate is a relatively young strand of academic research which considers the psychology and sociology of what makes people happy and well. Somewhat bizarrely, this stream of research traces back to NASA, who in the 1960s commissioned academics to consider the 'actual or potential wide-ranging impact on our society of the program of space exploration'. Thus was born the Social Indicators Movement, which sought to emulate the perceived success of the postwar economics profession in measuring and intervening in the economy. Over the years the sociologists and psychologists amassed a huge amount of data about our social conditions and how we respond to them. The research comes mostly from large scale survey data, which has been shown to be robust within countries (inter-country comparison is more difficult due to cultural effects). The academics have been working away, holding conferences and writing in their journals (including the serious academic *Journal of Happiness Studies*), but the chasm between academia and policy remains vast. It is only recently that the research has come to the attention of a few UK policy-makers.

Well-being research provides a way of analysing competing claims about policy programmes. Even in this era, focused as it is on 'what works' and evidence-based policy, there is an overwhelming emphasis on proxy indicators. But if we can measure well-being directly, it could help correct our tendency to confuse means and ends. To make this argument clearer, we might take as an example the ways in which decisions are taken about how to measure progress in society.

Politicians focus on GDP growth as the key indicator of progress. But research shows that the relationship between economic growth and well-being has broken down in the richer countries of the world. Thus in the UK in the last thirty years economic output has doubled, but happiness has remained resolutely flat, whilst depression is rising and trust is falling. As Andrew Oswald recently said: 'Some economists and policy-makers will go to their deathbeds ignoring these data. The numbers are too scary. They imply that clever people have for decades given the wrong advice to governments and citizens … The best evidence now suggests that growth does not work' (*Financial Times*,

17.3.05). The mindset that economic growth is an end rather than a means has powerfully embedded itself in the minds of policy-makers worldwide. A report by the European Commission published in February 2005 indicated the extent to which this is the case when it stated that:

> … the vast majority of European Union citizens do not make a connection between their quality of life and the economic situation in their country. It is therefore necessary to eliminate this discrepancy otherwise it may eventually create a problem when it comes to explaining certain public policies (Special Eurobarometer 215/Wave 62.1).

If reality conflicts with the theory, so much the worse for reality.

What gets counted counts, and policy-makers are still under the sway of economic numbers. One of the key policy conclusions which emerges from research is that we need to measure well-being to see how we are really doing as a society. A systematic set of national well-being accounts could consider levels of happiness and satisfaction, trust, social well-being, meaning and purpose. If we made this the core of how we measured progress, we would live in a radically different society. And all policy could also do a well-being impact analysis. For example, the decision to extend the gambling laws was based on a narrow economic analysis of jobs created (mixed with heavy corporate lobbying). There was little analysis of the impact on well-being, which would probably have led to the opposite outcome.

What does the concept of well-being have to offer the left? Thinking of well-being as one of the true ends of policy, alongside social justice, would enable the left to be more sophisticated in its interventions. Thus we have already seen conceptions of poverty shifting away from purely economic definitions to considerations of whole sets of circumstances, through ideas such as social exclusion. One area that has been largely overlooked, however, is the issue of mental illness, which is extremely detrimental to well-being.Traditional poverty interventions around material redistribution are clearly not enough to deal with mental health problems, which one in six people in the UK suffer from at any time. An analysis based on well-being rather than economics alone could better encompass the needs of those with such problems. Furthermore, raising the well-being of the worst

off often requires an approach based on promoting self efficacy rather than one which sees people as passive recipients of welfare. Poverty research is currently moving in this direction, and, for example, Ruth Lister's recent work stresses the desire of the poor to be treated with respect and to have autonomy. But policy practice has yet to catch up.

Well-being research strongly supports the left's traditional redistributive agenda. The evidence is clear: a pound in the pocket of a poor person is worth more in well-being terms than it is in a rich person's. This holds even more strongly across rich and poor nations. But well-being research also provides a nuanced understanding of inequality. Research shows that Europeans are less happy as inequality rises, but this is not the case in the US. This implies that our response to inequality is cultural. In the US inequality tends to reinforce people's belief that they live in a meritocratic society - inequality tends to be seen as reflecting people's different abilities.

But the real power of well-being politics is in helping the left to create a vision of the good life. The left has traditionally been 'deficit focused'; it needs a more positive vision of the good life in post-scarcity societies, where most people do not live in absolute poverty. In the absence of any vision beyond making poorer people richer, a policy vacuum has developed. This vacuum is then filled by the constant call to raise people's material living standards. This is an appropriate strategy for dealing with those in the lowest quintile of income distribution, but it is bizarre when applied to those who are already relatively affluent. There are many more fruitful ways of focusing policy; and areas where well-being research could cast some light on alternatives include work, education, health and sustainable development. Detailed consideration of these can be found in new economics foundation's *Well-being Manifesto,* but here are some of the highlights.

## Aspects of the well-being agenda

### Work and time

Research shows that our work, both paid and unpaid, is profoundly important for our well-being. Good work can provide us with purpose and challenge, and the opportunity to meet others, and can constitute an important part of our identity. Therefore a well-being economy needs to be concerned with the quality of work in which we engage. There is a growing literature showing what

constitutes 'good work'. One of the most important insights in this area has come from the research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi into 'flow' - an important contributor to well-being. He defines flow in terms of experiences where we are completely absorbed in what we are doing, and where time feels like it passes very quickly. He argues that we experience flow when we are engaged in activities that are challenging but for which we have the skills to meet the challenge. His research suggests that around 15 per cent of people have never experienced flow, whilst around 20 per cent say they feel it every day, with the rest somewhere in between. The research suggests that work is, in fact, one of the places we are most likely to find flow. We need to think about how to redesign work so that it enables people to flourish and experience flow. The evidence suggests that this is likely to go hand in hand with greater productivity, and would help to deal with the fact that more workplace sickness arises from mental health than any other cause.

Whilst good work can promote well-being, and unemployment is terrible for our happiness, the UK has the longest working hours in Western Europe. Long working hours crowd out some of the key things that the research shows bring well-being: time spent with friends and family, volunteering and doing things in the local community, spending time in the natural environment or engaging in sports and hobbies. A significant proportion of those working long hours are not doing so because they love their work or because they are poor. It is on the mistaken belief that more money and more consumption will bring happiness. In the US, research which has tracked people across time shows that at any given stage most people believe that 20 per cent more income would make them happier. But measuring their life satisfaction a few years later when they have achieved that rise in income shows that they are still no happier - they have adapted to the new level of income. Status effects are also powerful: people are always comparing themselves with others and wanting to get to the top of the pile. But this is a zero sum game in well-being terms as we are fighting for places on a hierarchy - if I'm richer than you then necessarily you are poorer than me.

One of the strongest points that emerges from the well-being research is that we spend too much time chasing money, and not enough time with our friends and family. A vision of the good life for the left needs to grapple with this, building on ideas of thinkers such as André Gorz. One simple mechanism

which would begin to deal with this issue would be to allow people to 'buy back' their time from their workplaces: in other words to trade income for working time. More broadly, as a society we should try and take our future productivity increases in the form of time rather than income. This seems to be an emerging phenomenon. A Cambridge University study found that, despite increasing pressures to earn and spend more, over a quarter of British adults aged 30-59 have voluntarily made a long term change in lifestyle that resulted in earning less money. The most common reason for the change was to spend more time with their families. Downshifters were spread fairly evenly across age groups and social grades. The study dispelled the myth that downshifting is confined to middle-aged wealthier individuals who have accumulated substantial assets and can afford the financial risk. Thus many people are already turning against the growing pressures to earn to take back their time - showing that well-being politics is tapping into something quite fundamental.

**Education**

There is a lack of clarity about what the education system is for. It seems based on a curious mix between two ideas. Firstly there is the concept of the renaissance man, roundly educated in a range of academic subjects. Secondly there is the idea that education is a preparation for your working life in the economy. A well-being focus says that education should promote a flourishing life. It should aim to create capable and emotionally well-rounded young people who are happy and motivated. Research by the new economics foundation found that young people's happiness and curiosity plummeted between primary and secondary school, never to recover. The number of children strongly agreeing to the statement 'I learn a lot at school' dropped from 71 per cent at primary school to 18 per cent at secondary school. We also found that the primary school with markedly the best academic results of the four examined had the lowest levels of happiness and curiosity. This confirms something which we all know: the targets culture in secondary schools is leading to distorted incentives. Rather than promoting pupils' curiosity and personal development, teachers have to maximise grades by teaching to the test.

The academic system is also extremely narrow. The psychologist Howard Gardner showed many years ago that we have a range of 'intelligences' (including musical, spatial, physical, interpersonal and intrapersonal), but that

the education system focuses overwhelmingly on the linguistic and mathematical. The Tomlinson report was the turning point at which we failed to turn: Blair ignored the report's proposed reforms to the education and examination system for 14-19 year olds (including a long needed rethink of the A-level system) because of fear about the pre-election perceptions of a small number of middle-class parents in swing seats. We need to broaden the scope of the education system to enhance creativity, social skills and emotional intelligence. How would schools look if the league tables ranked them on the new economics foundation's measures of curiosity and happiness? We need different incentives in place in order to get different results.

## Health

There are obvious links between the promotion of health and of well-being. It is becoming increasingly clear that psychological factors influence people's health to a very large degree. One of the most astonishing findings of research in this field is the huge positive influence of happiness on longevity. One piece of evidence for this comes from the nuns study. In the 1930s, a group of young nuns were asked to write a short autobiography. These papers were recently reanalysed in terms of the amount of positive emotions expressed in the writing. A strong relationship was found to exist between the amount of positive emotion expressed (taken as a proxy of well-being) and the longevity of the nuns (who had very similar lifestyles with regard to, for example, diet and living standards). Ninety per cent of the quarter who had expressed the most positive emotion in their autobiographies were still alive at the age of 85, compared to just 34 per cent of the quarter who had expressed the least positive emotion. There is currently some discussion about how the relationship between happiness and longevity actually operates: are happy people less stressed, or, for example, do they look after their bodies better? Whatever the specifics of how it works, however, it is clear that there is a strong relationship between well-being and longevity.

An incredible amount is spent on our 'health' service, but most of it focuses on dealing with physical symptoms of sickness. We need to reconfigure the purpose of the system in order to promote well-being, or what the World Health Organisation calls complete health, which it defines as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease

or infirmity'. It is acknowledged amongst policy-makers that there is a need to shift the system from being treatment oriented to being more prevention focused. Whilst we are taking some steps towards this, we need to accelerate this process. We should invest and commit to disease prevention and public health promotion rather than focusing on technical solutions to ill-health and a 'pill for every ill'. As discussed earlier, mental health promotion is also integral to promoting well-being. The evidence shows that our self perceived health matters far more than our objective health status in terms of our well-being. And promoting overall well-being through a combination of psycho-social interventions will have positive feedback on physical health.

## Community

The traditional left model for intervention has focused on the state, and has underestimated the importance of non-state actors, especially communities acting for themselves. In particular, research shows that community engagement not only improves the well-being of those involved but also improves the well-being of others. The relationship is positive in both directions: involvement increases well-being and happy people tend to be more involved in their community. We are social animals: for example, there is the amazing statistic that if you presently do not belong to any group, joining a club or society of some kind halves the risk that you will die in the next year. Government is increasingly seeing the voluntary sector and social enterprise as a means to deliver public services, and funding is following this aim. But this is to underestimate the importance of community organisations, which are essentially social glue. There are a huge number of unincorporated community organisations which are below the radar of government. Increasing support for them is likely to create a powerful well-being multiplier effect.

## Sustainable development

The environmental movement has been languishing in the UK for at least the last decade. One reason for this is that its focus upon *limits* has not been something that has commanded popular support. Well-being politics provides the opportunity to revitalise the environmental movement through providing compelling evidence that our present unsustainable lifestyles are not making us any happier. In fact materialistic people (those who believe that money and

possessions will make them happier) are less happy than others. Well-being politics creates the space for the discussing the idea that we could move towards a more sustainable lifestyle whilst maintaining or even increasing our quality of life. This could be the most important outcome of any politics of well-being.

There are, however, tensions between individual well-being and sustainable development, which are not always acknowledged. Air travel is a case in point. The language of 'sustainable communities' glibly marries the ideas, but the focus is more on liveability than real sustainability. There are difficult choices to be made, as was also indicated by ippr's Commission on Sustainable Development in the South East. Notably their second working paper was titled 'The problems of success: reconciling economic growth and quality of life in the South East.'

## The challenges for a politics of well-being

There are a number of challenges faced by well-being politics.

The first is the mistaken belief that happiness constitutes well-being. We have goals other than happiness which are worth pursuing. The good life is not just about maximising happiness. For example, a freedom fighter may sacrifice everything to fight for the freedom of her country. Or, more prosaically, there is the question of having children. Research suggests that becoming a parent increases levels of meaning and purpose, but decreases life satisfaction. Well-being has at least two dimensions. One is based on happiness and pleasure - life satisfaction is a good indicator of this. The other is more closely aligned to self efficacy, purpose and challenge. The person who climbs a mountain, engages in historical archival research or raises a child does not feel moment-by-moment happiness. Instead she has a sense of self efficacy, and engages with challenge. This comes back to an ancient battle between conceptions of the good life. The hedonic school of thought said that we should maximise pleasure. The eudaimonic said that we should lead flourishing lives, of which pleasure was a part, but that challenge and meaning were crucial.

A second challenge is the mistaken view that the point of politics is solely to maximise well-being - what is known as utilitarianism. Richard Layard argues that he is a utilitarian, and believes in maximising happiness. Happiness and social justice can, however, live in uneasy tension. The key problem is the issue

of psychological adaptation. If I am poor or deprived (e.g. due to a disease), but adapt to my condition and am a relatively happy soul, this gives the utilitarian no argument for intervention. And, as discussed earlier, research shows that whilst inequality makes people less happy in Europe, people are happy with it in the US as it confirms to them that they live in a meritocracy. So the utilitarian ethic is not enough to get us to social justice. (Layard in fact cares greatly about inequality, and is mistaken in calling himself a utilitarian: he would approve of situations which help the worst off even if they do not maximise happiness). Similarly, research by MORI shows that ethnic diversity in a locality tends to reduce happiness. The utilitarian conclusion may be to restrict diversity. But our beliefs about freedom, discrimination and fairness tell us that this is wrong. This shows that we care about more than individual well-being, and that the good society does more than simply aim to maximise it. Therefore well-being research needs to be situated in a broader political framework, which is concerned with social justice and environmental sustainability alongside well-being. This is fundamental.

Thirdly and relatedly, well-being research can help to inform the debate, but it cannot provide all the answers. Well-being research is good at setting the direction of policy by reminding us of what contributes to flourishing. It is less good, however, at technical questions of how to best operationalise a certain policy. For example, to create an economy which promotes well-being needs an understanding of political economy and behavioural economics, areas which are outside the scope of well-being research (see for example the article by Andrea Westall in this issue.

There are, then, three questions which well-being research is still grappling with, although each of them is superable. One issue is that of our expectations and ability to adapt. If our expectations always rise as fast as our situations improve, perhaps we can never increase well-being. The question that is occupying well-being research presently is what precisely do we adapt to, and what do we not adapt to. For example, Richard Easterlin has argued that longitudinal studies show that we do not adapt to our friendships and relationships in the same way as we do to our financial situation. These kinds of insights are crucial to forging a politics of well-being.

A further issue that researchers are grappling with is the question of what role culture plays in what gives us well-being. For example, it seems likely that

the effect of being made unemployed on well-being is a function of the particular structure of Western industrial societies, where the employment relationship is pervasive and key to our identities. This raises the interesting question for policy-makers of whether to take a particular 'taste' as given, or to seek to change it. This might apply, for example, in relation to the research indicating that happiness is higher in locales which are less ethnically diverse.

Finally, researchers need to deal with the challenge of policy by averages: how far are the constituents of well-being universal and how far do they vary for individuals? Even if the average person gets well-being from their relationships and community, what about the odd outliers, for example, who genuinely want to spend all their time working? This is the liberal challenge to some of the more paternalistic formulations of well-being politics. Therefore, alongside needing to be pretty sure about what causes well-being, and confident that policy can be effective in making a difference, we also need to try to formulate policy in such a way that it does not unduly restrict people's choices. This might lead to what some American academics have described as a 'libertarian paternalism', where people are guided to make the 'right choice' but are always given the opportunity to make other choices. For example, it has been shown that default options are very important: when people are given the option to opt into a company pension, far fewer join than if they have to opt out. These kinds of techniques can be used to create policy which makes the 'right' choice the easy choice.

## The future of well-being politics

The politics of well-being is likely to become more and more powerful. Unlike some traditional left politics, it is resonant with what people want and care about. It is also aspirational, unlike environmental politics, which is perceived as being about limits. It will take time to embed, as politicians are naturally frightened of tabloid headlines along the lines of 'government concerned about Britain's happiness'. This was an important factor in the low profile given to the Strategy Unit's paper on life satisfaction.

Nevertheless, well-being is being taken up in a range of places. Most prominently, the new UK sustainable development strategy *Securing the Future* committed to exploring how policies might change 'with an explicit well-being focus', and to developing more comprehensive well-being indicators. These

well-being indicators will be powerful symbols of what we care about as a society (echoing the Bhutanese desire to want to promote Gross National Happiness rather than Gross National Product). Indicators are also powerful facilitators of change in society. Once we measure something we can analyse causation, change behaviour and continue to check how we are faring.

Local government is grappling with well-being, having been given a broad power to promote economic, social and environmental well-being by the Local Government Act 2000. The power has largely been treated with confusion, but there are emerging examples of creative uses, including smart procurement which meets social goals simultaneously with economic considerations. In Scotland, Dumfries and Galloway is presently piloting indicators of needs satisfaction and well-being in order to refocus the health system around well-being rather than sickness.

At the regional level, some of the Regional Development Agencies are giving serious consideration to the implications of the well-being research, with the East Midlands Development Agency at the forefront, having commissioned thinking on alternative measures of progress.

Academic research in this area is being taken more seriously, and therefore is likely to become more well resourced and significant. For example, in the US there is now a powerful Positive Psychology network, whose aim is to focus psychology on flourishing rather than on illness. And in the UK, Bath University has a large ESRC programme considering well-being in developing countries.

The politics of well-being has articulate proponents, resonance amongst the public and genuinely new political insights to offer. Everybody cares about quality of life, and there is growing awareness that this rests on far more than economic considerations. Therefore well-being politics is situated to inform where we go next. What remains at stake, however, is whether or not this will be in a broader political framework that takes social justice and environmental sustainability seriously. I am an optimist about the future of well-being politics, but a pessimist about the politics of social justice or environmental sustainability - the broader political framework of the good life.