

Eckersley, R. 2004. As good as it gets. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January – 1 February, *Spectrum*, pp. 1, 4,5. Is Life getting better or worse? *The Age*, 31 January, *Review*, pp. 1-2.

As good as it gets

Our material comforts are catered for but, meanwhile, social connections seem to have collapsed. It's time to rethink our search for happiness.

Richard Eckersley

Is life getting better or worse?

The question will strike many as so broad as to be unanswerable, even meaningless. Surely, they will say, life is getting better in some respects, worse in others; or better for some people, but worse for others. Yet I think it is the defining question of our times. There are good reasons why we should take it seriously.

One reason is social. Our societies are not static, but changing rapidly, especially through economic growth and technological development. While change may affect some individuals adversely and others beneficially, it also has a pervasive influence on societies as a whole. We assume the direction of change is, all in all, making life better. Also, the bluntness of the question matches the crudeness of the indicator with which we measure this 'improvement': GDP or Gross Domestic Product. Another reason is personal. Our lives may well be improving in some ways, and not in others. But life is not lived in impermeable compartments. What happens in one area of life flows through to others. We live a life, not a collection of bits of it.

So the question reflects a coherence in our lives, socially and personally, that needs greater acknowledgment. How we answer the question bears on almost every issue on the public and political agenda. However, public and scholarly debate rarely reflects this connectedness. In fragmenting our consideration of life into separate issues, policies, portfolios, sectors and disciplines, we dodge the hard questions of how all these things interact with each other to shape the life we lead and the societies we live in.

A central tenet of modern Western culture is the belief in progress, the belief that life should get better - healthier, wealthier, happier, more satisfying and interesting. Is this the case? If our answer is 'yes', we can continue to assume that human history (or more accurately, Western civilisation) is on the right trajectory, and needs nothing more than periodic course corrections - the task of governments. If the answer is 'no', then the most fundamental assumptions about our way of life - assumptions that have long been broadly agreed and taken for granted - must be re-assessed. The task we face goes far beyond the adjustment of policy levers by government; it demands an open and spirited debate about how we are to live and what matters in our lives.

The question is difficult to answer objectively on the basis of current trends, patterns and prospects. Every relevant issue is contested; experts continue to argue over whether our future will be bleak or rosy, nationally and globally. There are pessimists and optimists about economic prospects, the state of the environment, population growth, technological change, social justice and equity, war and peace. Some commentators believe that if we are resolute and continue on our present path of economic and technological development, humanity can overcome the obstacles and threats it faces and enter a new golden age of peace, prosperity and happiness. Others foresee an accelerating deterioration in the human condition leading to a major calamity, even the extinction of our species (along with many others).

I suspect temperament inclines us one way or the other. But at a more rational level, one reason we remain divided is that the data are incomplete, or open to differing interpretations. We lack a full understanding of what constitutes 'the good life'; we do not have good measures of many aspects of it. Furthermore, most analysts view the question through the prism of their own particular expertise, giving a distorted or incomplete picture. To the *economist*, we are consumers making rational choices to maximise our utility or personal satisfaction; to the *psychologist*, we are self-actualising beings who seek to fulfil basic needs such as autonomy and belonging; to the *physician*, we are individuals who want to be free of disease and disability; and to the *ecologist*, we are one of millions of species whose existence depends on our interactions with other species and our physical environment.

The widespread perception that things are getting worse at the societal level is significant, regardless of whether it is 'factually' or 'objectively' true. The resulting erosion of faith in society and its future influences the way people see their roles and responsibilities, and their relationship to social institutions, especially government. It denies people a social ideal to believe in - something to convince them to subordinate their own individual interests to a higher social goal - and a wider framework of meaning in their lives. As the social vision fades the psychological 'load' increases on personal expectations. The implications and consequences for society of this loss of faith are serious, even if it does not show up in measures of personal happiness and life satisfaction. These consequences are apparent from both social surveys and historical accounts.

Hugh Mackay says Australians are becoming used to the ways things are; they are beginning to accept that life will not be different from the way it now is. There has been an 'outbreak of realism', he says; Australians seem less inclined to hanker after some idealised society than they used to be. One dimension of this adjustment is that Australians are becoming more insulated; there is a growing sense of disengagement from the national agenda.

We are increasingly preoccupied with our personal lives – our families, our friends, our house and garden, our cars, our leisure and entertainment. We are 'tending our own patch' and becoming absorbed in our own concerns....our focus

has narrowed to an extent that allows us to exclude some of the ‘nasty stuff’ which has become too unpalatable to think about.

As one participant in Mackay’s group discussions put it: ‘It’s all too hard...I talk to the dog’. Public attitudes to politics and politicians, Mackay says, reflect a level of ‘cynicism bordering on contempt’ and ‘despair bordering on disgust’.

Confirming what I said in the previous chapter about the tension between the pursuit of personal happiness and contributing to social wellbeing, Mackay says the pay-off for disengaging is to feel better. The happiest participants in his 2001 *Mind & Mood* study were, without a doubt, ‘those whose horizons were most limited, and whose concerns were unremittingly local, immediate and personal’. We all feel this pull. But Mackay also warned in 1998, when the trend towards ‘turning inward’ became apparent, that this was a vulnerable time for Australians. ‘Seeking to be insulated from issues which might previously have stimulated debate can provide short-term emotional relief, but, if this solidifies into a serious attitude of disengagement, it will lead to the kind of political apathy which encourages the abuse of political power.’

And this is just what has happened by 2003, which, according to Mackay, has offered a new glimpse into the meaning of disengagement: a government can be perceived as lying to the people and people, by and large, won’t care. ‘When the national mood is like this, governments can get away with murder.’ The Nobel Prize-winning writer Gunter Grass said the German Weimar Republic collapsed and the Nazis took over in 1933 ‘because there were not enough citizens’. This was the lesson he had learned. ‘Citizens cannot leave politics just to politicians.’

Mackay’s reading of the political mood has been contested. Political scientist Murray Goot says polls that have tracked political attitudes over decades do not indicate a growing disengagement. There is evidence of increasing mistrust of politicians and rising political cynicism, but not declining interest in politics. But other recent surveys tend to confirm Mackay’s findings, at least in broader social, if not political, terms. As noted in Chapter 3, the Brotherhood of St Laurence trial project on values and civic behaviour highlights the sense of disconnection between the personal and the social, with people being aware that ‘they manage, or control, their reactions to social issues so they can maintain a comfortable and self-focused life’. They could not see ‘how achieving or failing to achieve one’s personal aspirations related to achieving one’s aspirations for society’.

Clemenger’s fourth *Silent Majority* report, published in 2002, also emphasises that Australians are turning away from the big national and global issues, over which they feel they have no control, to focus on family, home and, especially, their children. It says there has been a ‘concern collapse’, with people now saying they feel ‘very concerned’ about fewer societal issues than ever before.

Fed and frightened by the media, people carry more and more on their shoulders, with no buffers. They are exposed to everything. Their spheres of concern have

grown, whilst their spheres of influence have not...In 2002, it seems our concern has been stretched to the limit. The issues are monumental, and there is nothing we can do. The elastic band has snapped and the inevitable result is 'concern collapse'.

People have lost trust in traditional institutions including government, media, church, school, police and the judicial system, and are resigned to the fact that things are unlikely to change, the report says. Paradoxically, however, this development has also contributed to a new self-reliance – a moral autonomy that is discussed in Chapter 11 – where people feel they have to take control of virtually every aspect of their own lives. '(T)he less faith we have in authority, the more trust we place in our own judgement.'

There is an alternative to resignation and apathy, however. The pain of awareness that is driving the retreat to home and hearth comes from a sense of impotence and futility. Another response is to engage more actively, and benefit from being part of a group, believing in a cause and having clear life goals - all of which enhance wellbeing. A recent British study of almost forty activists who had participated in protests, demonstrations and campaigns found the actions were empowering, and gave participants a sense of collective identity, unity and mutual support. 'Empowering events were almost without exception described as joyous occasions', says psychologist John Drury. 'Participants experienced a deep sense of happiness and even euphoria in being involved in protest events.'

Naomi Klein, author of *No Logos*, confirms this, saying that anti-globalisation demonstrations are reported as menacing confrontations but are often joyous events. The first time she participated in one of these counter-summits, she had a distinct feeling that 'some sort of political portal' was opening up, she says.

This opening was a sense of possibility, a blast of fresh air. These protests – which are actually week-long marathons of intense education on global politics, late-night strategy sessions, festivals of music and street theatre – are all like stepping into a parallel universe. Urgency replaces resignation, strangers talk to each other, and the prospects of a radical change in political course seems like the most logical thought in the world.

It is being a bystander - stuck between being aware and concerned about issues and feeling we can't do anything about them - that hurts most. We can turn away – or join the fray.

Historical perspectives show what is at stake. British historian Kenneth Clark observed in his acclaimed BBC television series *Civilisation* that civilisation, however complex and solid it seems, is really quite fragile. In the concluding episode, after reviewing thousands of years of the rise and fall of civilisations, he warns that 'it's lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilisation. We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion just as effectively as by bombs'.

Barbara Tuchman, in *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, says that until recently historians have avoided the century because it could not be made to fit into a pattern of human progress. The Black Death, which killed a third of the population between Iceland and India, was only one of the century's problems. It was a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age – put simply, a bad time for humanity. Tuchman notes that in Europe a gulf had opened between Christian beliefs and conduct, not least within the Church itself, and between the ideal of chivalry and the behaviour of the nobility. 'When the gap between the ideal and real becomes too wide, the system breaks down,' she observes. 'Legend and story have always reflected this; in the Arthurian romances the Round Table is shattered from within. The sword is returned to the lake; the effort begins anew. Violent, destructive, greedy, fallible as he may be, man retains his vision of order and resumes his search.'

Tuchman is conscious of parallels with our modern age (the book was first published in 1978). Referring to the judgement of another historian, she says that after the experiences of the twentieth century, we have greater fellow-feeling for 'a distraught age whose rules were breaking down under the pressure of adverse and violent events'. We recognise with a painful twinge the marks of 'a period of anguish when there is no sense of an assured future'. Still, the lesson was ultimately consoling: 'If our last decade or two of collapsing assumptions has been a period of unusual discomfort, it is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.'

Norman Cohn is another historian who has noted parallels between the late Middle Ages and the twentieth century. His book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, is a study of the revolutionary chiliastic or millennialist movements which swept Europe between the close of the eleventh and the first half of the fifteenth centuries. These were groups of people, led by messianic leaders preaching the doctrine of the final struggle and the coming of the new age, who saw themselves as the elect and strove ruthlessly towards an end which by its very nature could not be met - the Millennium, when 'the world would be inhabited by a humanity at once perfectly good and perfectly happy'. Cohn sees the movements as representing a 'collective paranoid fanaticism' that was also evident in the twentieth century totalitarian movements of Communism and Nazism. He would no doubt see closer similarities with today's religious and national fundamentalism and cultism, which were less evident when his book was published in 1957.

Cohn argues that societies become vulnerable to revolutionary chiasm when the existing structure of a society is undermined or devalued, and the normal, familiar pattern of life has undergone 'a disruption so severe as to seem irremediable'. The disintegration of traditional social groups and authority and rapid changes in the relative status and prosperity of different social strata are among the conditions that diminish the cohesion and stability of a social structure.

And it is then that particular calamities will appear particularly calamitous. Above all, calamities caused by unseen or unknown agencies...may then produce an emotional disturbance so widespread and acute, such an overwhelming sense of being exposed, cast out and helpless, that the only way in which it can find

effective relief is through an outburst of paranoia, a sudden, collective and fanatical pursuit of the Millennium.

All these ingredients exist in our times. Medieval life was ruled by religion; it is not surprising that social pathology was expressed through religion in the form of millennialist cults. Its modern expression may be found in today's fundamentalist cults and terrorist groups, especially in more collectivist societies (for example, the Aum Shinrikyo sect and the al-Qaeda terrorist network). Some might see signs of millennialist fervour in America in the wake of September 11. But rampant individualism is also a hallmark of our age, especially in Western societies, and it may be that the same pathology now finds its most common expression in other forms: most tragically, in the massacres committed by alienated individuals but, more generally, in the personally and socially destructive preoccupation with the self.

All societies need visions or stories that embody their values and goals, and define who their people are, what they believe and where they want to go. Hugh Mackay said of Australia in 1997 that what seems to be lacking is a 'guiding story' that connects leaders and people: 'a set of coherent values and beliefs, imaginatively couched, that gives us a framework for making sense of our lives and, indeed, for taking more confident steps towards control of our destiny'. This theme recurs in his 2001 report. Australia has been crying out for visionary, inspirational, national leadership, he says. 'We have yearned for a guiding story that would help us make sense of what is happening to us, and to our society. But no such story has emerged, because no such leadership has emerged.'

In the past, the quest for material progress and prosperity provided much of that 'guiding story' for Western nations, perhaps especially the newer nations such as Australia and the United States. It seems it no longer does. Progress needs to be redefined, the story rewritten, taking account of a new global context - social, economic, environmental, cultural and spiritual.

This is an edited extract from Well & Good: How We Feel and Why it Matters, by Richard Eckersley (Text Publishing, \$32). To be released on February 9.