

Eckersley, R. 1999, Reply to: Saunders, P., In defence of progress: A response to Richard Eckersley, *Family Matters* no. 52, Autumn, pp. 42-46.

In defence of progress

Richard Eckersley replies

The simplest response I could make to Peter Saunders' critique of my paper, *Redefining Progress*, would be to suggest that people read, or re-read, the paper and draw their own conclusions about the merits of our arguments. I hope some will.

However, most will probably have neither the time nor the inclination to do this so, for them, let me offer some comments on Saunders' analysis. I will group these under three headings: economic growth and well-being; the choice and use of social indicators; and the relationship between the individual and society.

Economic growth and well-being: Saunders says or implies that I call for a halt to growth; bemoan the historical achievements of growth; argue that our social problems are the product of economic prosperity alone; and suggest that a radical redistribution of wealth and income would increase happiness. But I did none of these things.

I described a threshold hypothesis which states that economic growth (as currently defined and derived) improves quality of life up to a point, beyond which further growth may lead to a decline in quality of life. I cited evidence from indicators such as the Genuine Progress Indicator and subjective measures of social quality of life to support this possibility (the GPI suggests the turning point came in 1970s). Winding back 100 or 200 years of material progress is not at issue.

I questioned the status accorded to the rate of growth as the prime benchmark of government policy, given the doubtfulness of the two key assumptions behind growth – that it is increasing well-being and is ecologically sustainable (the latter a point Saunders virtually ignores). I argued that the task was not simply to abandon growth, but to move beyond growth – to focus not just on the rate of growth, but also on its content, and look more closely at what was growing, what effects this growth was having and what alternatives might exist. Wealth distribution was, therefore, only one element of this task, and discussed mainly in the context of the adverse effects of inequality on health, on which there is a large and growing medical literature (Dixon, 1999).

In discussing social problems, especially the problems of young people, I did not argue that these were solely the result of economic prosperity, but of a range of social, economic and cultural trends in modern Western societies, including changes in the family, education, work and the media. Saunders does mention these other factors, but because his critique focuses strongly on the issue of economic growth, he gives the impression I am laying all our ills at its door: for example, saying our problems 'cannot be explained as the products of economic prosperity'. And while he makes repeated references to some of the five cultural traits that I discussed – economism, consumerism, postmodernism, pessimism and individualism - he never really

addresses my arguments about their effects on values and so on personal and social well-being.

Social indicators: Saunders dismisses several indicators on which I base my case (and which don't fit his), while providing scant evidence or argument for doing this. He ignores other indicators altogether. Thus he questions the research findings on young people's psychosocial well-being, suggesting the design of the studies may be flawed. He may be right, but unless he is familiar with the research and can suggest what is wrong with it, his criticism rings hollow. Let me take two examples of the research Saunders questions.

A study of Australians' mental health and well-being, published last year, found that those aged 18-24 had the highest prevalence of mental disorders during the 12 months prior to the survey – 27 per cent - with prevalence declining with age to 6 per cent among those 65 and over (ABS 1998). The survey covered anxiety disorders, affective disorders (such as depression) and substance-use disorders. The study notes that because the survey did not cover all forms of mental health problems, it may underestimate the extent of mental disorder in Australia.

The survey was carried out by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and involved a sample of 10,600 adult Australians. It used a questionnaire endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and trained interviewers to assess the prevalence of mental disorders through the measurement of symptoms and their impact on daily life. Expert groups that provided advice on the survey content and design included: the WHO Centre at the University of NSW, the National Health and Medical Research Council Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Centre at the Australian National University, the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of NSW, the departments of psychiatry at the universities of Western Australia, Melbourne and Adelaide, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. A technical advisory committee endorsed the validity of the survey instrument and the ABS tested it under household survey conditions.

The second example is the study of university undergraduates that found almost two thirds admitted to suicidal ideation (thoughts) or behaviour in the previous 12 months (Schweitzer et al 1995). The study of over 1,600 students was conducted by researchers at the Queensland University of Technology and the University of Queensland and published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. While the prevalence of ideation is high compared to other studies (which nonetheless reveal disturbingly high levels of ideation and attempt), I cited it for two reasons: it involved an older age group that suicide statistics suggest is more at risk than the secondary students on which the other studies I'm aware of were based; and it included a broad and scaled definition of ideation, so illustrating well my point about a gradient of distress among young people.

The study found 21 per cent revealed minimum ideation, agreeing they had felt that 'life just isn't worth living', or that 'life is so bad I feel like giving up'. Another 19 per cent revealed high ideation, agreeing they had wished 'my life would end', or that they had been 'thinking of ways to kill myself'. A further 15 per cent showed suicide-related behaviour, saying they had told someone 'I want to kill myself', or had

‘come close to taking my own life’. Finally, 7 per cent said they had ‘made attempts to kill myself’.

Maybe we can debate whether those identified in the ABS study really had a clinical illness, or whether the suicidal ideation revealed in the Queensland study was serious and sustained (rather than a moment of despair or despondency in an otherwise tolerable-to-happy year). But from my point of view, this is not the most important issue, which is that the findings do suggest that modern life has, indeed, become hostile to the well-being of a significant proportion of young people.

Other new research is also revealing the real costs of the lust for riches our culture promotes. American psychologists have found that not only is having more things unfulfilling, but that people for whom affluence is a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall well-being (‘Dark Side of American Dream: Money Can’t Buy Well-Being’, *International Herald Tribune*, 3 February 1999, p1). The research shows there are substantial psychological penalties associated with valuing ‘extrinsic goals’ such as money, fame and beauty. Referring to the ‘dark side of the American dream’, the researchers say that our culture seems to be built on precisely what turned out to be detrimental to mental health. This is exactly my point.

Saunders says that what people say in attitude polls may have little relation to what they actually believe or to how they actually behave. As evidence, he says I admit several times that people convinced that things are getting worse readily say their own situation is getting better (actually I say they are personally satisfied and optimistic). This suggests, he says, that everyday experience produces satisfaction, but received wisdom from the media and other distant sources are generating superficial responses of apparent dissatisfaction.

While it is true that some broader concerns may not impact greatly on our personal satisfaction, the evidence I cite from, for example, the Middle Australia Project, doesn’t bear out the claim that these concerns all have ‘distant sources’ or are ‘superficial’ (Pusey 1998). There is also another explanation for the difference between how people feel about themselves and how they feel about society at large; I have discussed this matter at length elsewhere (Eckersley, invited paper under review). Research suggests that personal happiness or life satisfaction is a homeostatic condition and relatively independent of external circumstances – that is, we adjust expectations and standards and employ cognitive devices to maintain satisfaction and happiness at a relatively stable, and high, level (Cummins, submitted for publication). This is one reason why wealth is a poor predictor of happiness, and why, in the developed world, people have not become happier as their societies have become wealthier.

Saunders says I selected my indicators carefully, and asks why I did not use life expectancy, which shows a dramatic improvement over the past 100 years, as a key indicator. In fact, I did cite life expectancy - as one of five indicators of Australia’s development over the past 100-150 years - and acknowledged its impressive rise. I also noted that life expectancy was rising steadily when per capita GDP was not, suggesting that our greater longevity had less to do with economic growth than was often believed – and claimed by Saunders – and more to do with other factors such as

better public health, education and housing (the indicator trends and their significance are discussed in Eckersley 1998).

Saunders' interpretation of other statistics can also be challenged. On the unemployment rate, he says the economy has absorbed a huge rise in the number of employed women, implying it has performed well in generating jobs; in fact, the employment-to-population ratio has been relatively steady over the past 20 years (when unemployment has been high) because of declining participation by young people and older men (Richardson 1998). He endorses Maley's close linking of more crime with more divorce; however, the rise in crime precedes the rise in divorce (although I agree family factors contribute to crime).

Saunders says the Henderson poverty line has often been challenged, and reports new findings that suggest child poverty has fallen. Since those results have become available I have included them in my analysis (eg, 'Generation Wrecked', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 1999, p10). However, one of Australia's leading poverty researchers, Peter Saunders – another Peter Saunders – says that while the poverty line has been extensively criticised, to date 'no viable alternative has been proposed and the Henderson poverty line continues to be widely used to measure poverty' (Saunders 1998).

The individual and society: Perhaps the most puzzling of Saunders' criticisms is his claim that I am reluctant to hold individuals responsible for their own misery or happiness, choosing instead to blame society. I have two points to make about this.

The first is the inconsistency in his own argument. He says that once our basic material and other needs are met, it is for individuals to find their own visions for the future and their own sense of meaning. Yet later, in discussing crime, he stresses the importance of bringing up young people to respect 'a strongly-internalised moral code', and the effect on this upbringing of changes in the way our children are being socialised by family, school and media.

Saunders would appear to believe that moral values are a product of the individual's socialisation, but not how they see the future or where they find meaning in life. I, on the other hand, see people's worldview and sense of meaning and purpose as strongly related to their values, and that all these result from a dynamic and complex interaction between the individual and society.

My second point, then, is that far from holding others unaccountable for their actions, or denying that solutions might lie in ourselves, I stated that viewing the serious problems and challenges we faced in terms of our values re-established their links with our personal lives. I said: 'Change will come about from choices, individually taken as citizens and consumers, parents and professionals, which reflect a collective will to think and do things differently'.

In summary, Peter Saunders' defence of material progress rests on an inaccurate, or at best incomplete, representation of my case against it, and a good deal of unsubstantiated opinion and assertion. Leaving aside the other defining features of modern Western societies, I am left wondering why he, and many others, seem

unwilling even to countenance the possibility that ever-increasing material wealth is not the be-all and end-all of human well-being, and may even harm it.

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