

Eckersley, R. (2007) What's wrong with the official future? In Hassan, G (ed). *After Blair: Politics After the New Labour Decade*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, pp.172-84.

What's wrong with the official future?

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Over the past several decades, we have witnessed a profound loss of faith in a future constructed around notions of material progress, economic growth and scientific and technological fixes to the challenges we face. This demise of the 'official future' is of utmost importance, but remains largely ignored in public and political debate.

The failure of the official future represents, at one level, a coalescence of various national and global issues - the periodic eruptions over the past fifty years of worries about nuclear war, technological change, social decline and environmental destruction. Of course, these concerns, singly taken, are well known and discussed. And the totality of their impacts informs futures studies and writing on post-modernity.

However, the depth and breadth – and, most importantly, the political significance – of the loss of faith barely register in current debate and discussion. We are still to understand its full implications, especially that our situation is not just a reflection of the changed external 'realities' of life, but also of a profound destabilisation of our inner lives.

This chapter discusses material progress, its rationale and why this is flawed; the public's loss of faith and the credibility gap which flows from this; and the prospect of a paradigm shift from material progress to sustainable development. My main concern is not with the changes in the external world, but with the subtle and complex relationship between those 'outer' changes and the 'inner' world of thoughts and emotions, and what this means socially, politically and personally.

This loss of faith applies to a large proportion, probably a majority, of people in the developed, Western world. People in developing countries may still share a faith in material progress and have most to gain from what it offers. Nevertheless, the issues I discuss are still relevant to their world and the choices they make.

Going for growth

The 'official future' prioritises economic growth as the basis for improving quality of life. This position is shared by all governments and major political parties - a 'policy constant' largely beyond scrutiny or debate. Whether the leader is Bill Clinton or George W. Bush, Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair, the belief that 'it's the economy, stupid' rules. As the Australian Prime Minister John Howard states repeatedly: 'Maintaining a strong, dynamic and growing economy is the...overriding responsibility of government' (Howard 2004).

The concept of material progress regards economic growth as paramount because it creates the wealth necessary to increase personal freedoms and opportunities, and to meet community needs and national goals, including addressing social problems. In public policy terms, economic growth means more revenue, bigger budget surpluses, and more to spend on health, education and the environment.

There are, on the face of it, good grounds for the equation of more with better. *The Spectator* magazine claimed in 2004 that ‘we live in the happiest, healthiest and most peaceful era in human history’ (Hanlon 2004). And if now was good, it argued, the future would be even better. The belief that we live in the best of all times has been most famously and controversially articulated in recent years by Danish academic Bjorn Lomborg (2001) in *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World*. Lomborg concludes that mankind’s lot has improved vastly in every significant measurable field and that it is likely to continue to do so: ‘...children born today – in both the industrialized world and developing countries – will live longer and be healthier, they will get more food, a better education, a higher standard of living, more leisure time and far more possibilities – without the global environment being destroyed. And that is a beautiful world’. Like many others, Lomborg credits this achievement largely to material prosperity resulting from economic growth.

It is true that, today, many more people are living richer, longer lives than ever before. In the year 1000, according to Angus Maddison (2001), the 270 million people in the world on average could expect to live about 24 years and earn US\$400 a year (in today’s dollars). Today there are over six billion people on earth who, on average, can expect to live about 67 years and earn almost US\$6,000 a year. In the developed world in the past two hundred years, per capita GDP has risen about twenty-fold, and life expectancy has more than doubled. In the rest of the world, per capita GDP has increased more than five-fold and life expectancy has also more than doubled.

Costs and qualifications

However, there is growing evidence that quality of life is not the same as standard of living, and that how well we live is not just a matter of how long we live, especially in rich nations. Against the gains we have to set the following qualifications (Eckersley 2005):

- The benefits have been unevenly distributed globally, and there have been recent reversals in both per capita income and life expectancy in some nations.
- The benefits of rising income to quality of life diminish as income increases, and in rich nations health and happiness are at best only weakly related to average income levels.
- Economic growth is not the only, or perhaps even the main, factor behind improving health and wellbeing. Increased knowledge, better education and institutional reforms have also made major contributions, even in the absence of sustained growth.

- Increases in life expectancy partly reflect biomedical advances and individual lifestyle choices that say little about changes in social conditions and may be offsetting adverse health impacts of these changes.

Beyond these qualifications of the benefits of material progress, we must also acknowledge several formidable and growing costs related to sustainability, opportunity and meaning, all which have real and potentially immense implications for human health and wellbeing.

- The destruction of the natural environment of which we are an intrinsic part. However we address local and regional impacts through increased wealth and technological innovation, the evidence suggests we are disrupting planetary system on an increasing scale.
- Increasing inequality, sustained high unemployment, growing under-employment and overwork, pressures on public services such as health and education, and the geographic concentration of disadvantage, leading to deeper and more entrenched divisions within society.
- Psychosocial costs of cultural qualities such as materialism and individualism, which are deeply embedded in the worldview of material progress. These costs relate to meaning in life and things that create meaning – purpose, autonomy, identity and hope.

In other words, advocates of material progress not only oversell the benefits of growth, they also ignore the social and environmental costs of growth processes, or at least assume they can be more than compensated. But if, in creating wealth, we damage the fabric of society and the state of the natural environment more than we can repair with the extra wealth, we are going backwards in terms of quality of life, even while we grow richer. Material progress depends on the pursuit of individual and material self-interest that, morally, cannot be quarantined from other areas of our lives.

Trends in health and wellbeing

The flaws in the model of material progress become clear when we look more closely at trends in health and wellbeing (often measured as happiness or life satisfaction) and their relationship with wealth. Comparing nations, increasing income confers large benefits at low income levels, but little, if any, benefit at high income levels (Inglehart 2000; Eckersley 2005). Life expectancy levels off at a per capita income of about US\$5,000, and happiness at about US\$10,000. Across countries, happiness is more closely associated with democratic freedoms than income, and is strongly linked to equality, stability and human rights.

Looking at the relationship between income and wellbeing within countries, population happiness has not increased in recent decades in rich nations (over 50 years in the United States) even though people have become, on average, much richer. However, the rich are happier than the poor, especially in poorer countries but even in rich nations. While it is often said that money cannot buy happiness, most surveys reveal the two are linked. They

also show, however, that the relationship is strongest at low incomes, where money improves living conditions and alleviates hardship. Above this level, wealth has symbolic value as a measure of social status, and status affects wellbeing through the social comparisons it defines. So income-related differences in happiness will persist no matter how far average incomes rise through economic growth.

The costs of progress are more apparent if we examine a wider range of measures of wellbeing. Take young people, whose lives reveal most clearly the tenor and tempo of our times (Eckersley 2005; Eckersley, Wierenga and Wyn 2006). While their health, measured by life expectancy and mortality, continues to improve, and most say in surveys that they are healthy, happy and satisfied with their lives, adverse trends in young people's health range across both physical and mental problems, and from relatively minor but common complaints such as chronic tiredness to rare but serious problems such as suicide.

The extent to which we are falling short of maximising human wellbeing, despite rising life expectancy and material wealth, was demonstrated in a large study of adult Americans, which examined mental health as 'a syndrome of symptoms of positive feelings and positive functioning in life' (Keyes 2002). It found that 26 per cent of people were either 'languishing', depressed, or both – that is, mentally unhealthy; 57 per cent were moderately mentally healthy – neither mentally ill nor fully mentally healthy; and only 17 per cent of people were 'flourishing' – that is, enjoyed good mental health.

Public perceptions of quality of life

Declining quality of life is also apparent in people's perceptions of life today. These perceptions are at the heart of the case against the official future. Studies over the past decade, both qualitative and quantitative, reveal levels of anger and moral anxiety about changes in society that were not apparent thirty years ago (Eckersley 2005). They show that many people are concerned about the materialism, greed and selfishness they believe drive society today, underlie social ills, and threaten their children's future.

About twice as many Australians say quality of life is getting worse as say it is getting better. The latest in a series of annual reports on 'the mind and mood' of Australians says there is growing concern that the state of Australian society - rougher, tougher, more competitive, less compassionate – is producing stress, edginess and a feeling of personal vulnerability (Ipsos Mackay 2005a). Australians feel they 'seem to lurching from one difficulty to another with the prospect of a serious crisis emerging'. The blame is repeatedly directed at political leaders, who are accused of 'short-term thinking' and neglecting to invest in the country's future.

A British study, *Changing Britain, Changing Lives*, found that despite higher incomes, better health and greater opportunity for women, Britons were increasingly depressed, unhappy in their relationships, and alienated from civic society (Woodward 2003). A report of the New Economics Foundation says that, for many people, politics and corruption have become almost synonymous (Walker 2002).

Some studies make explicit the tension between concerns about quality of life and the political emphasis on growth. For example, surveys show that 87 per cent of Britons and 83 per cent of Australians agree that their societies are ‘too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter’ (Hamilton 2002, 2003a). An Australian survey revealed that ‘having extra money for things like luxuries and travel’ ranked last in a list of seven items judged ‘very important’ to success, well behind the top-scorer, ‘having a close and happy family’ (Bagnall 1999). And in contrast to government priorities, ‘maintaining a high standard of living’ ranked last in a list of sixteen critical issues headed by educational access, children and young people’s wellbeing, and health care.

A recent Australian survey which included questions asked in 1988 and 1995 provides striking evidence of the gap between economic performance and people’s perceptions and preferences (Ipsos Mackay 2005b). Despite a decade plus economic boom, the proportion of Australians who felt that quality of life in about 15 years’ time would be better fell from 30 per cent in 1988 to 23 per cent in 2005. The proportion that said it would worsen rose from 40 to 46 per cent.

Offered two positive scenarios of Australia’s future - one focused on individual wealth, economic growth and efficiency and enjoying ‘the good life’, the other on community, family, equality and environmental sustainability – 73 per cent expected the former, but 93 per cent preferred the latter. This gap has widened markedly since 1995. Optimism about the future of world has slumped. Asked to choose between two statements about the world in the 21st century, only 23 per cent thought it was likely to be ‘a new age of peace and prosperity’; 66 per cent opted for ‘a bad time of crisis and trouble’.

Suspicions of the Apocalypse

Our perceptions of the future are increasingly shaped by images of global or distant threat and disaster: earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, disease pandemics, terrorist attacks, genocide, famine. While these hazards are not new, previous fears were never so sustained and varied, and so powerfully reinforced by the immediacy and vividness of today’s media images.

Our responses to these apocalyptic suspicions about the century ahead involve subtle and complex interactions between the world ‘out there’ and the world ‘in here’ (in our minds). Evidence suggests that we are being drawn in at least three directions by the prospects of dramatic, even catastrophic, social, economic and environmental changes: towards apocalyptic nihilism, fundamentalism, or activism. If this categorisation seems too stark, think of the responses as tendencies or deviations from the norm, with subtle to extreme manifestations, and which can overlap, co-exist and change over time in individuals and groups. My intention is to highlight the way that people, individually and collectively, can respond very differently to the same perceptions of threat and hazard.

Apocalyptic nihilism: the abandonment of belief; decadence rules. At the extreme are young criminals whose apocalyptic language conveys a message that ‘in a world stripped of meaning and self-identity, adolescents can understand violence itself as a morally grounded gesture, a kind of purifying attempt to intervene against the nothingness’ (Powers 2002).

Others respond in less dramatic ways to this sense that ‘it’s a late hour in the day, and nothing much matters anymore’. They could, for example, become even more determined to succeed, to be a winner at all costs, or lose themselves in the quest for pleasure or excitement. These lifestyles have their own hazards, including various forms of addiction. Nihilistic inclinations are evident at a more mundane level in a growing political disengagement: a focus on home and hearth, on tending our own patch. This can be an effective coping strategy, but there is a cost: the sense of the world as threatening and hostile, and that ultimately we are all on our own, produces a fraying of citizenship and democracy, and a vulnerability to the politics of self-interest and fear.

Apocalyptic fundamentalism: the retreat to certain belief (whether secular or religious); dogma rules. In an extreme form, this is ‘end time’ thinking, rife among fundamentalist Christians in the US, in which global war and warming are embraced as harbingers of the Rapture and Christ’s return to Earth (Scherer 2004). Commentators are unsure how influential ‘end time’ philosophy is within the Bush administration, but argue the hard questions about Bush’s religious convictions need to be asked. Philosopher Peter Singer (2004, cited in McGinn 2004) says that President Bush’s religious outlook is best represented by the Manichean idea of a force of evil in the world, with an apocalyptic Second Coming imminent and America as the divinely appointed nation set to destroy the forces of Satan.

The growth in fundamentalist thought extends beyond religion. Neo-liberal economics, which underpins the official future, also represents a form of fundamentalism in its rigid adherence to an economic doctrine in the face of the growing evidence of its failure to deliver promised benefits. Fundamentalism produces a comforting certainty about life and a call to united action against threats, both moral and physical, but it also generates simplistic solutions to complex problems.

Apocalyptic activism: the transformation of belief; hope rules. This reflects the desire to create a new conceptual framework or worldview (stories, values, beliefs) that will make a sustainable future possible. The counter-trend that this ‘activism’ represents is exemplified by the so-called downshifters and cultural creatives: people who are making a comprehensive shift in their worldview, values and way of life, including trading income for quality of life. Rejecting contemporary lifestyles and priorities, they place more emphasis in their lives on relationships, communities, spirituality, nature and the environment, and ecological sustainability.

Nihilism and fundamentalism represent maladaptive responses to our situation, whatever their short-term or personal appeal, because they do not address its root causes. Activism is an adaptive reaction. So let me say a little more about this response.

Agents of change

Studies by American researchers Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson (2000) reveal that about a quarter of people in Western societies are ‘cultural creatives’. They represent a coalescence of social movements that are not just concerned with influencing government, but with reframing issues in a way that changes how people understand the world. Ray and Anderson say that in the 1960s, they represented less than five per cent of the population, whereas now they have grown to 26 per cent.

Surveys on downshifting show that 25 per cent of Britons and 23 per cent of Australians aged 30-59 had ‘downshifted’ in the previous ten years by voluntarily making a long-term change in their lifestyle and earning less money (Hamilton and Mail 2003; Hamilton 2003b). Contrary to the popular belief that they tend to be middle-aged and wealthier people, downshifters are spread across age groups and social classes.

Beyond those who are changing their lives are many more people who are thinking about it. Hugh Mackay (2003), while noting the social dangers inherent in the process of disengagement, says many people are using this ‘retreat time’ to explore the meaning of their lives and to connect with their most deeply-held values. Whether this search for meaning is expressed in religion, New Age mysticism, moral reflection or love and friendship, the goal is the same: ‘to feel that our lives express who we are and that we are living in harmony with the values we claim to espouse’.

The revolt against the official future is also consistent with a development noted by some sociologists: a new moral autonomy and a more ‘cooperative or altruistic individualism’ (Eckersley 2005, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This deep conceptual shift in how we construe the self has far-reaching social implications, not least for politics because it undermines the philosophy of narrowly defined self-interest and personal freedom and responsibility that currently dominates political thinking.

Beyond growth, towards sustainability

The activism I have described is closely associated with the concept of sustainable development, which is increasingly challenging material progress as a framework for thinking about human betterment. Sustainable development does not accord economic growth ‘overriding’ priority. Instead, it seeks a better balance and integration of social, environmental and economic goals and objectives to produce a high, equitable and enduring quality of life (Eckersley 2005). A common theme is the perceived need to shift from *quantity* to *quality* in our way of life. Rather than casting the core question in terms of being pro-growth or anti-growth, we need to see that growth itself is not the main game.

We can also characterise the shift from material progress to sustainable development as replacing the outdated industrial metaphor of progress as a pipeline – pump more wealth in one end and more welfare flows out the other - with an ecological metaphor of

progress as an evolving ecosystem such as a rainforest – reflecting the reality that the processes that drive social systems are complex, dynamic, diffuse and non-linear.

In recent years, international bodies such as the OECD and the World Bank have acknowledged the need to place more emphasis on the quality – or content – of growth. As Vinod Thomas, the lead author of a 2000 World Bank report, *Quality of Growth*, remarked at its launch: ‘Just as the quality of people’s diet, and not just the quantity of food they eat, influences their health and life expectancy, the way in which growth is generated and distributed has profound implications for people and their quality of life’ (Thomas et al. 2000).

The key challenge of sustainable development has usually been seen as reconciling the requirements of the economy – growth – with the requirements of the environment – conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. However, our growing understanding of the social basis of health and happiness can shift this perspective, making an important contribution to working towards sustainability. It provides a means of integrating different priorities by allowing them to be measured against a common goal or benchmark: improving human wellbeing.

If we were to make this shift in thinking, we would be forced to recognise that the basis of health and happiness is much more complex, and often less tangible and material, than current strategies presume. Of particular importance is the mounting evidence that money and what it buys constitute only a part of what makes for a high quality of life. And the pursuit of wealth can exact a high cost when it is given too high a priority – nationally or personally – and so crowds out other, more important goals.

In other words, we need to think, politically, less in terms of a ‘wealth-producing economy’ and more about a ‘health-creating society’. Confronted with the magnitude and global scale of twenty-first century challenges – population pressures, environmental destruction, economic equity, global governance, technological change - it makes no sense to continue to regard these issues as something we can deal with by fiddling at the margins of the economy, the main purpose of which remains to serve, and promote, our increasingly extravagant – and unhealthy and unsustainable - consumer lifestyle.

The current worldview framed by material progress and based on self-interested, competitive individualism has created a ‘shallow’ democracy (where citizenship involves voting every few years for whichever party promises the best personal deal) and has resulted in reduced social cohesion, weaker families and communities, and so diminished quality of life. Challenging this construction is a new worldview framed by sustainable development and based on altruistic, cooperative individualism. This encourages a ‘deep’ democracy (where citizenship is embodied in all aspects of our lives), leading to greater social cohesion, stronger communities and families, and so better quality of life. The former represents a vicious cycle, the latter a virtuous one.

Political implications

The demise of the official future is causing a cascade of consequences. Our visions of the future are woven into the stories we create to make sense and meaning of our lives. This ‘storying’ is important in linking individuals to a broader social or collective narrative, and affects both our own wellbeing (by enhancing our sense of belonging, identity and control over our lives, for example), and societal functioning (by engaging us in the shared task of working for a better future).

Elections have rarely, if ever, been about deep desires and concerns about quality of life or the future; and, increasingly, election campaigns are manipulated through the use of sophisticated marketing tactics to focus on a few, often contrived, issues. With the loss of a wider faith, there is a retreat from the public realm to the private, with many people turning inwards to focus on their own lives. Trust in government and other ‘official’ institutions is eroded. As leaders learn they can get away with it, they pursue power and self-interest more ruthlessly.

It may even be that we are moving between paradigms depending on circumstances and occasions. Asked about social directions and preferred futures, we inhabit a new worldview defined by sustainable development; when it comes to voting in elections, we choose the old paradigm of material progress because we are aware that this is the framework within which government operates. Democracy is jeopardized because it continues to function in a paradigm that now alienates the people.

In other words, apocalyptic nihilism and fundamentalism are finding clearer political expression than activism, which has yet to find its voice in mainstream politics. We may be approaching a tipping point, at which one or another of the responses dominates. But is it impossible to predict when that point will occur and in which direction it will tip.

History and legend show that when the gap between the ideal and real becomes too wide, the system eventually breaks down (Tuchman 1989). In the meantime, however, it tends to become more oppressive, as those whose interests are vested in the status quo strive to maintain their control and advantage. And today, these individuals and groups have enormous economic, political and technological power to call upon.

Our current worldview and lifestyle are neither inevitable nor optimal, but are culturally ‘manufactured’ by a massive and growing media-marketing complex. For example, big business in the United States spends over US\$1000 billion dollars annually on marketing – about twice what Americans spend on education (Dawson 2003, cited in York 2004). This expenditure includes ‘macro-marketing’, the management of the social environment, particularly public policy, to suit the interests of business.

Cultures have been said to exert a pervasive but diffuse influence on actions, providing the underlying assumptions of an entire way of life, while ideologies exert a powerful, clearly articulated, but more restricted, basis for social action (Swidler 1986). The increasing weight of public perception, scientific evidence and global events will – eventually - tilt the balance in favour of a new cultural order. However, how and when this new order becomes expressed ideologically remains unclear. We could see politics

continue to be misguided for some time by nihilistic or fundamentalist responses; a new political force could emerge; or there might be a shift of the whole political spectrum in a new direction, with mainstream parties forced to acknowledge new cultural ideals, but in ways that move beyond the traditional socialist-left and conservative-right frame of reference.

Seen in a broad, cultural and futures context, the neo-liberal, market-based strategies that currently dominate government begin to look more like a political supernova: the final, flaring brilliance of a dying star.

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