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## **Redefining progress: Shaping the future to human needs**

**Opening keynote address by  
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The need to redefine progress is not a new message, but it is becoming more compelling. Whether we look at young people's well-being or, more broadly, at the overall quality and sustainability of modern life, the evidence is mounting for a fundamental change in our worldview.

### **Introduction**

Ten years ago, I wrote for the Australian Commission for the Future a report, *Casualties of change: the predicament of youth in Australia* which analysed the worsening plight of young people, expressed in rising suicide, drug abuse and crime, and also more widely in an increasing social detachment and alienation (Eckersley 1988).

I argued that a range of economic, social and technological changes had combined and interacted to create a society that had become increasingly hostile to our well-being, and especially that of young people because of their social and psychological vulnerability. The changes included increased family conflict and breakdown, youth unemployment, poverty, education pressures and media influence, and also the emergence of a sense of hopelessness about the world's future.

At the time this broad, holistic view of the health and well-being of an entire generation was unusual and the report attracted a great deal of public and professional attention (the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, was even questioned about the report by journalists). Douglas Coupland's novel, *Generation X*, which labelled the generation, was still four years away. Public and political interest tended then to be focused on discrete aspects of the wider picture - drugs, crime and youth homelessness – and political responses targeted each specific issue, as they still do today. Youth suicide, now deeply imprinted on our national conscience, then flickered only occasionally at the margins of public consciousness.

I said in the report that public and political debate about these matters remained far too superficial, and warned that “as a result, the measures we are adopting to combat the problems we face will, if they make any impact at all, never fully succeed.” Ten years on, how well has this prediction stood up?

## Recent trends in youth problems

Let's look first at what has happened with some of the relevant social and economic indicators (Eckersley 1988, ABS 1998a). In 1985-86, 811,000 dependent children, or 20.7% of all children, were living in poverty as measured by the Henderson poverty line; in 1995-96, 1,026,000 children (21.5% ) were living in poverty - up from 233,000 (6.2%) in 1966. The youth (teenage) unemployment rate in 1987 was 20.3%; in 1997 it was 20.9% - up from 3.3% in 1967. The divorce rate in 1987 was 10.6 per 1000 married males; in 1996 it was 12.9 - up from 3.7 in 1966. (The proportion of divorces involving children has fallen over the ten years.)

Turning to the measures of health and well-being that I considered in the report, none has shown a marked improvement over the past ten years. We are still losing the war against drugs. Crime remains a serious social problem. The epidemic of youth suicide continues.

Opiate overdose deaths (excluding suicide) increased six-fold between 1979 and 1995 (Hall and Darke 1997). The trend reflects a general perception that the drug problem in Western societies has worsened in the 1990s (Fombonne 1998). Recent studies suggest illicit drug use and the health problems associated with that use are increasing (Health Education Unit 1998, Patterson et al 1998, Williams 1998).

Crime is mainly an activity of the young and especially young males. The rates of break, enter and steal, motor vehicle theft, fraud and stealing have levelled off or fallen in the 1990s after roughly doubling over the 1970s and 1980s (Mukherjee and Dagger 1995). The rates of serious assault, robbery and arson have continued to rise in the 1990s, and have increased four- to ten-fold between 1973-74 and 1996-97. Changes in reporting and recording crimes have contributed to this pattern of rising crime rates, but it is generally believed to reflect, in a somewhat distorted way, a real increase in crime. Criminal activity – although not all of it - is strongly linked to psychological problems such as conduct disorder or anti-social personality and there is separate evidence that these have become more common (Fombonne 1998).

The suicide rate for males aged 15-19 was 13 per 100,000 in 1986 and 17 in 1996; for males aged 20-24, the rate was 29 in 1986 and 33 in 1996 (Eckersley 1988, ABS pers com). Despite these figures, the rise in male youth suicide peaked in 1988 (at rates of 21 and 35), and appears to have plateaued since then, after trebling since the 1950s. Suicide rates for young women, while about double the 1950s rate, have not shown the sustained rise seen in males. This does not mean youth suicide is a male problem. Young women continue to attempt suicide more often than young men, but succeed less often because they tend to use less fatal means, especially overdosing.

It is likely that the rates under-estimate the increase in suicidal behaviour among young people in recent decades. Medical advances and other developments have reduced the lethality of suicide attempts during the past 30 years (suicide rates have fallen in most older age groups). These changes would have particularly affected female suicide.

However, the most significant development of the past decade has not been any shifts in these trends, but in our improved understanding of the extent of the psychosocial

problems young people are suffering today, and suffering at a younger age. The evidence suggests the problems are not confined to the socially disadvantaged and marginalised in our society, but are a product of being young in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While less than 0.02% of young people take their own lives each year, they represent only the tip of an iceberg of suffering, with recent studies showing that a fifth to a third of young people today experience significant psychological distress or disturbance (Zubrick et al 1995, Patton 1997, ABS 1998b). A recent survey of university undergraduates found almost two thirds reported some degree of suicidal ideation or behaviour in the previous 12 months, at least to the extent of saying they felt that 'life just isn't worth living', or that 'life is so bad I feel like giving up' (Schweitzer et al 1995). Almost 7% said they had 'made attempts to kill myself'.

The reasons for the worsening trends in psychosocial problems remain to be definitively established. They could differ for different periods and for different disorders. They could include links between problems with, for example, drug abuse being associated with crime and suicide. However, the main underlying reasons are believed to include the following factors (Eckersley 1993, Carnegie Council 1995, Rutter and Smith 1995, DH&FS 1997):

- Parental conflict, separation, abuse and neglect - leading to the absence of a close and trusting relationship with a caring, dependable adult.
- Changes in adolescent transitions – including the emergence of a youth culture that isolates young people from adults and increases peer and media influence; increased tensions between dependence and autonomy; and more romantic relationship breakdowns.
- Increased inequality, disadvantage and unemployment – creating a perception of a lack of opportunities in mainstream society.
- Cultural shifts - including increased individualism and higher expectations and society's failure to provide an adequate cultural framework of values, hope, meaning, purpose and belonging – both socially and spiritually.

The evidence for a gradient of distress among young people suggests that while tragedies such as suicide arise from intensely personal circumstances, they also represent the extreme end of a spectrum of responses by many young people to modern life. These range through degrees of suicidal attempt and ideation, depression, drug abuse and delinquency to a pervasive sense of alienation, disillusion and demoralisation (traits more likely to be expressed in passivity than through anger or anti-social behaviour).

Many recent surveys of youth attitudes here and overseas have reinforced the view that many (perhaps most) young people are not comfortable with the broader changes they see taking place in society, even if they remain happy and optimistic about their own personal circumstances (Eckersley 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b). Nor are they inspired by the visions of the future held up to them by society. Like many older people, they regard social institutions, especially government, with growing cynicism and mistrust. While most may continue to work within 'the system', many no longer believe in it or are willing to serve it.

## **A population health approach**

I have attempted in my work to give a sharp edge to an issue that, while clear-cut at its core (suicide, serious mental illness or drug abuse), is very diffuse and ill-defined at its wider social margins (alienation and disillusion). In doing this, I am conscious of treading a fine line between defining a broad, complex situation and exaggerating its seriousness. But this approach has been essential in drawing attention to the links between issues that are usually viewed in isolation, and the extent to which the problems of young people today go to the heart of our society and its culture and economy.

This perspective is consistent with the view in public health, stemming from the work of the British epidemiologist, Geoffrey Rose, that both health problems and their causes are often distributed continuously in a population, and that there is a relation between the mean (average) of a characteristic and the prevalence of deviance (Marmot 1998). A population-health approach involves lowering the risk for a whole population or sub-population, rather than attempting to identify and treat high-risk individuals. In the case of young people and their well-being, this means tackling the social, cultural and economic roots of the problems.

The family sits at the centre of this relationship between young people and the world. If the health of children is a measure of the health of the family, it is also true that the health of the family is a measure of the health of the society. What happens in the world affects what happens in the family. For many, the family is a haven, a sanctuary; for others it is a bear pit where all their bitterness, frustration and anger are unleashed. We hear a lot about the bear pits – the dysfunctional families – and the harm they do to children. We hear much less about the good that good families do: their ability to protect young people from the risks and hazards of life today (Silburn et al 1996, Resnick et al 1997).

In a second report for the Commission for the Future, *Youth and the challenge to change*, I described young people as “the miners’ canaries of our society, acutely vulnerable to the peculiar hazards of our times” (Eckersley 1992). I said: “The health and well-being of young people is a critical measure of a society for two reasons: in moral terms, how well a society cares for its weak and vulnerable is a measure of how civilised it is; in more pragmatic terms, a society that fails to cherish its youth, fails. It's as simple as that.”

The good news about the last ten years is that the situation – or at least several key features of it - may have stopped getting worse (illicit drugs stand out as a glaring exception). The bad news is that the situation is worse than we realised a decade ago.

The extent to which any success in containing the problems can be attributed to policy interventions is an interesting question. For example, one reason why some crime rates have stopped climbing may be the declining proportion of the population in the most crime-prone age group (Walker and Henderson 1991). The plateau in the male youth suicide rate could be the result of our greater awareness and openness about the problem, so reducing troubled young people’s sense of isolation and personal failure and encouraging them to seek help.

In reviewing what has been achieved in the past ten years, we need to bear in mind that many of the issues I have discussed – youth unemployment, child poverty, drugs, crime and, in recent years, youth suicide – have been high on the political agenda, and the target of sustained policy interventions over many years, even decades. The failure of these policies to improve the situation raises legitimate doubts about the way these problems are conceptualised and addressed – as I warned ten years ago.

Is this judgement supported by taking an even wider view of modern Western societies, and examining ‘macro’ measures of national life and what they reveal about the relationships that are central to our way of life – the relationships between economic growth, quality of life and ecological sustainability? This has been the subject of my work in recent years.

### **Growth and well-being**

In Australia and other developed nations, we have defined progress – how we make life better - in mainly material terms and measured it as a rising per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product). The Prime Minister, John Howard, declared in a speech to a World Economic Forum Dinner in Melbourne in March 1998 that: “The overriding aim of our agenda is to deliver Australia an annual (economic) growth rate of over 4% on average during the decade to 2010” (Howard 1998).

The Government’s strategic economic objectives were pursued not as ends in themselves, he said, but as the means for achieving more jobs, higher living standards and an effective social safety net. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister clearly set the rate of economic growth as the prime benchmark by which to judge his Government’s performance. Four of the six priorities Howard set out in his speech related to the ‘growth’ objective. The other two, dealing with social and environmental issues, were essentially compensatory – that is, they were aimed at offsetting the costs of growth.

The Coalition Government is not alone in placing so much emphasis on growth, in believing it to be a measure of all things (although it appears to be shifting from this position since the 1998 election). Its view is fairly representative of governments the world over. In his day, Paul Keating, too, once said that if you couldn’t grow the economy at over 4% a year “you might as well give the game away”.

If we were to sustain this rate of economic growth, we would be, *on average*, twice as wealthy as we are now in about 20 years (and ten times as wealthy in real terms as we were 100 years ago). On present trends, most of the new wealth would go to those already wealthy. Should this really be our top priority as a nation?

The equation of more with better - of standard of living with quality of life – in defining progress is coming under critical scrutiny in the research literature, but remains largely unquestioned in mainstream public and political debate. The fundamental assumptions about economic growth – that it enhances well-being and is environmentally sustainable - are rarely highlighted or explored. They should be.

In the late 1980s, the Chilean economist, Manfred Max-Neef, and his colleagues undertook a study of 19 countries, both rich and poor, to assess the things that

inhibited people from improving their well-being (Max-Neef 1995). They detected among people in rich countries a growing feeling that they were part of a deteriorating system that affected them at both the personal and collective level. This led the researchers to propose a *threshold hypothesis*, which states that for every society there seems to be a period in which economic growth (as conventionally measured) brings about an improvement in quality of life, but only up to a point - the threshold point - beyond which, if there is more economic growth, quality of life may begin to deteriorate.

The hypothesis has been supported in recent years by the development of indices, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, that adjust GDP for a wide range of social and environmental factors, including income distribution, unpaid housework and voluntary work, loss of natural resources, and the costs of unemployment, crime and pollution (Eckersley 1998, Halstead 1998, Hamilton 1998). These 'GDP analogues' show that trends in GDP and social well-being, once moving together, have diverged since about the mid-1970s in all countries for which they have been constructed, including the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

The reasons for this divergence may vary between nations, but include: the growing costs of environmental damage and resource depletion, including greenhouse gas emissions; increasing income inequality; unsustainable foreign debt; the rising cost of unemployment and overwork; the failure to maintain capital investment; and the transfer of (unpaid) household production to the market. The American non-profit, public-policy organisation, Redefining Progress, which developed the Genuine Progress Indicator, argues that much of the current growth in GDP derives from three things: "fixing blunders and social decay from the past; borrowing resources from the future; or shifting functions from the traditional realm of household and community to the realm of the monetised economy" (Cobb et al 1995).

Public opinion surveys also support the view that growth may have diminishing benefits and escalating costs. At a personal level, most people in the developed world are satisfied with life and optimistic about their future. However, from a broader, social perspective, most no longer appear to believe life is getting better despite being richer. Even the new alternative measures to GDP do not come close to reflecting the negativity expressed in surveys of public perceptions about the state of society and the future of humanity.

For example, in a national poll last year, 1200 Australians aged 18 and over were asked whether they thought overall quality of life - taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends - was getting better, worse or staying about the same (Eckersley 1998). A half - 52% - believed life was getting worse, with a half of these saying it was getting a lot worse, and only 13% that it was getting better. The rest - 33% - said quality of life was staying about the same.

The Middle Australia Project, directed by sociologist Michael Pusey, produced similar findings (Pusey 1998). Pusey says of his sample of 400 'middle Australians' (representing the middle 70% of urban householders) that: "Nearly two thirds of them admit that their material standards of living have risen in the past 10 years but, with their next breath, say that their quality of life is declining and that families are in trouble." The results show that the most common ways in which quality of life was

perceived to be falling were: too much greed and consumerism; the breakdown in community and social life; too much pressure on families, parents and marriages; falling living standards; and employers demanding too much.

Pusey says Australians are experiencing economic change as harmful pressure on the family. Over 90% of people believed family life was changing, with 54% saying it was changing a lot. Of these, two thirds said the negative aspects of these changes stood out most. These included: the breakdown of traditional values; too much consumerism and pressure to get more money and buy things; a breakdown of communication between family members; and greater isolation of families from extended family networks and the community. (The third who saw the changes as positive cited the more equal relationship between men and women, the sharing of housework and more freedom.)

Thus many Australians are identifying as a *problem* what governments persist in seeing as the *solution* to our situation. There is other evidence that becoming richer should not be our primary goal. For example, wealth is a poor predictor of happiness (Myers and Diener 1996). People who win the lottery are no happier a year after the event than they were before. Even the very rich are only slightly happier than the average citizen, and those whose incomes have increased over a ten-year period are no happier than those whose incomes have not.

People have not become happier as their societies have become richer. In most countries, the correlation between income and happiness is negligible; only in the poorest countries is income a good measure of well-being. In general people in rich countries appear to be happier than those in poorer countries, but the margin may be slim, and based on factors other than wealth.

Also, recent health research suggests that what is important to health in developed nations is not the physical effects of material deprivation associated with absolute poverty, but the psychological and social consequences of relative deprivation. The British medical researcher, Richard Wilkinson, a leading figure in this work, says that what seems to matter are the social meanings attached to inferior living conditions and how people feel about their circumstances and about themselves (Wilkinson 1994). The health data suggest, he says, that the quality of the social fabric, rather than increases in average wealth, may now be the prime determinant of the real subjective quality of human life.

The belief that material progress equates with a better life is so ingrained in our culture we are overlooking the importance of other factors - in particular, the personal, social and spiritual relationships that give our lives a moral texture and a sense of meaning - of self-worth, belonging, identity, purpose and hope. Positive life meaning is related to strong religious beliefs, self-transcendent values, membership in groups, dedication to a cause and clear life goals (Zika and Chamberlain 1992). In their book, *Understanding Happiness*, Bruce Headley and Alex Wearing (1992, p191) note that: "A sense of meaning and purpose is the single attitude most strongly associated with life satisfaction."

## **Growth and sustainability**

What about the assumption that economic growth is ecologically sustainable? While I can't answer the question in detail here, it is important to stress that any considerations of quality of life and well-being must take into account environmental issues.

The link between the quality and sustainability of life - between human well-being and environmental health - is pervasive, and includes spiritual, cultural and aesthetic dimensions as well as physical. The physical aspect is being brought into closer focus by the analysis of the implications for human health of environmental changes, including global warming, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution and land and water degradation and depletion. These implications range from increased conflict and natural hazards, through increases in infectious diseases and cancers, to disrupted food production.

Advocates of economic growth argue it is good for the environment (Eckersley 1998). As countries grow richer, consumer preferences and the structure of the economy change, technology becomes more efficient and cleaner, and the countries can afford to invest more in environmental improvements. While this is true of problems such as urban air and water quality, the evidence suggests this relationship is less likely to hold for the major, global-scale environmental issues such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and depletion of resources such as soils and forests. It also fails to account adequately for the transfer of polluting industries to other, poorer countries.

A recent analysis says that where environmental costs are borne by the poor, by future generations, or by other countries, the incentives to correct the problem are likely to be weak (Arrow et al 1995). The report states that empirical findings do indicate economic growth may be associated with improvements in some environmental indicators. However, "they imply neither that economic growth is sufficient to induce environmental improvement in general, nor that the environmental effects of growth may be ignored, nor, indeed, that the Earth's resource base is capable of supporting indefinite economic growth".

As things stand, a wide range of environmental indicators shows that, globally, we are still moving *away* from sustainability, not towards it (Eckersley 1998). A new report by the World Wide Fund for Nature includes a 'Living Planet Index' based on an assessment of forest, freshwater and marine ecosystems (WWF 1998). The report notes the index declined by about 30% between 1970 and 1995, "meaning that the world has lost nearly a third of its natural wealth in that time". The report also says that, globally, consumption pressure, a measure of the impact of people on natural ecosystems based on resource consumption and pollution data, is increasing by about 5% a year. At this rate, consumption pressure will double in about 15 years.

The final statement of the 1997 United Nations 'Earth Summit' stated that participants were "deeply concerned that overall trends for sustainable development were worse today than they were in 1992" (the year of the previous summit) (*The Canberra Times*, 29 June 1997, p4).

## Limits of growth

The need to question prevailing assumptions about economic growth, quality of life and ecological sustainability is also demonstrated by the trends in five indicators of Australia's development over the past 100-150 years - per capita GDP, life expectancy, unemployment, per capita energy consumption and population (Eckersley 1998). Australians are, on average, almost five times richer (in real terms) now than at the turn of the century. Per capita energy use, a broad measure of resource consumption and waste production, has increased correspondingly. The population has also increased about fivefold, so that total economic activity and energy use are about 25 times greater now than 100 years ago.

While Australians are materially much better off than ever before, some of the improvements in well-being are less directly linked to economic growth than is widely believed. Growth was stagnant before the Second World War, but life got better for most people because public policy initiatives improved education, health, housing and working conditions and, for some of this time, wealth and income were becoming more evenly distributed. Reflecting these changes, life expectancy, which has increased by about 30 years or 60% since the 1880s, was rising steadily when per capita GDP was not. With employment, the nature of the relationship with economic growth appears to be shifting; despite relatively strong growth, unemployment in the 1990s is at its highest level outside the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s.

The crux of the debate about progress is the direction of change. Will we improve the quality and sustainability of life by continuing on our present path of progress - increasing average wealth to give the average consumer greater choice? Or do we need to find a new path that leads in a different direction, towards new personal and social goals? Both expert analysis and public opinion suggest the need to canvass more openly the possibility and feasibility of new directions.

The rationale for economic growth as we pursue it today seems flawed in several important respects: (1) it overestimates the extent to which past improvements in well-being are attributable to growth; (2) it reflects too narrow a view of human well-being, and fails to explain why, after 50 years of rapid growth, so many people today appear to believe life is getting worse; (3) it underestimates the gulf between the magnitude of the environmental challenges we face and the scale of our responses to them; and (4) it neglects the social costs of growing inequality.

The issue of contention is not simply a question of growth versus no-growth. The main political justification for promoting growth is jobs. Economic expansion may be better than contraction in increasing employment, but it is also now creating more overwork and underwork, more job insecurity, and a widening income gap. All these things, like unemployment, put pressure on individuals, families and the whole fabric of society.

We need to focus not just on wealth creation but also on the distribution and conservation of wealth, not just on the rate of growth but also on the content of growth. We need to look much more closely at *what* is growing, what *effects* this growth is having, and what *alternatives* might exist. Improving both our current personal well-being and the long-term quality and sustainability of life require the

same shift: from an economy characterised by high growth, increasing inequality and conspicuous consumption, to one directed towards safeguarding the natural environment, increasing social cohesion and equity, and enriching human life.

The task, then, is not simply to abandon growth; it is to move beyond growth. To suggest this is not necessarily to be 'anti' the economy, business or technological innovation, but to argue that these activities need to be driven by different values towards different ends.

## **Culture and values**

The Australian biologist and theologian, Charles Birch, once said that: "What we do in the world flows from how we interpret the world". Making life better must involve re-examining our worldview and values. The magnitude of the challenge we face can seem overwhelming, but viewing it in terms of values re-establishes the links with our personal lives. Values matter because they are essentially about how we get along with each other and manage our affairs; they define our relationships and shape our identities, beliefs and goals.

There are several characteristics of modern Western culture which powerfully influence our values. They include: economism, consumerism, postmodernism, pessimism and individualism. These cultural qualities don't act in isolation. They are all inter-related to a greater or lesser degree, and they interact with structural changes in society – for example, the growth of large cities, with their increasing anonymity, and the growing infiltration of technology into our lives.

*Economism:* Economics is amoral - that is, it is not concerned with the morality of the choices consumers make to maximise their utility, or personal satisfaction. The more economic choices govern our lives (individually and as a society), the more marginalised moral considerations become. The market may be an efficient way of allocating resources – of deciding *how* something is done – but not *what* we do and *why*.

*Consumerism:* Most if not all societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. For example, according to the 13th Century theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, the seven deadly sins are pride (self-centredness), envy, avarice, wrath, gluttony, sloth and lust; the seven cardinal virtues are faith, hope, charity, prudence, temperance, fortitude and religion. Consumer society has effectively reversed these lists, making the vices virtues and vice versa. We cannot quarantine other aspects of life, including those most important to well-being, from the moral consequences of the economic requirement for ever-increasing consumption.

*Postmodernism:* Postmodernity, or late modernity, describes a world coming to terms with its limitations, including the end of the 'modern' dream of creating a perfect social order through the rational instruments of science, technology and bureaucracy. It is world characterised by relativism, pluralism, ambivalence, ambiguity, transience, fragmentation and contingency. Its danger is an 'anything goes' morality, a belief that values are just a matter of personal opinion, and that one set of values is no better

or worse than another. Values cease to require any external validation, or to have any authority or reference beyond the individual and the moment. 'Personalised' values become another aspect of moral marginalisation and individual isolation.

*Pessimism:* While most people are personally optimistic, they are socially pessimistic. That is, we are hopeful about our own personal futures, but concerned about the future of society or humanity. The significance of this pessimism remains conjectural. But it seems likely that it affects, perhaps subtly and indirectly, people's attitudes to many aspects of their lives – personal relationships, education, work, citizenship – once again, increasing the risks of 'distancing' the individual from society.

*Individualism:* Expressed as an acknowledgement of human dignity and the rights to freedom, self-determination and political participation, and as a celebration of human potential, individualism has been a powerful force for good in human history. Expressed as self-centredness and greed, a pre-occupation with entitlements, an abrogation of responsibilities and a withering of collective effort, individualism can be destructive to both personal and social well-being.

The point about these five cultural traits is that they each have, or can have, positive dimensions. The inalienable right of individuals to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' is at the core of modern democracy. The loosening of social constraints and obligations can enhance personal freedom and creativity, and bring a greater social vitality, diversity and tolerance. Yet taken too far, and expressed as material indulgence and moral licence, rather than social and political engagement, these cultural trends deliver, not liberation, but a new enslavement. In particular, they threaten democracy because political power comes from a sense of collective, not individual, agency - from pursuing a common vision based on shared values, not maximising individual 'utility'.

And it seems to me that in recent times, we have reached the point where the cultural negatives are reinforcing each other, and we now lack the necessary cultural balances. Thus, far from providing a moral counter-weight to economism and consumerism, the moral ambiguity of postmodernism and the loss of faith in a better world strengthen their celebration of the individual and the gratification of personal needs and wants that are never sated because new ones keep getting created.

Even so, we still see a mix of benefits and costs, gains and losses. In some respects we have improved as a society: we have become better educated, more tolerant and aware, less sexist and racist. There is no single current of social change or progress, and different streams can flow at different speeds. Some of the contemporary improvements may be the result of social and political processes that began long ago and reflected different values. And it may be that we are yet to experience the full costs of what we see happening today: the creation of a society in which growing numbers of individuals are disaffected and social institutions are increasingly failing to meet people's deepest needs.

The Australian human ecologist, Stephen Boyden, has listed the universal psychosocial conditions of life that are conducive to health and well-being (Boyden 1987, p. 79). They include an environment and lifestyle that provide a sense of

personal involvement, purpose, belonging, responsibility, interest, excitement, challenge, satisfaction, comradeship and love, enjoyment, confidence and security. It is clear that for more and more people modern life no longer offers these qualities.

### **Flames of revolution?**

There are three ways we can respond to our situation. We can attempt to show things are not as I have described them; as the economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, said: “Given the choice between changing and proving that change is not necessary, most people will get busy on the proof”. Or we can divert ourselves in distractions; as Woody Allen said: “Don’t under-estimate the power of distraction to keep our minds off the truth of our situation”. Or we can change; as the anthropologist, Margaret Mead, said: “A small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

There are now more and more conversations taking place about the issues I have discussed here. There are a thousand brushfires of revolution breaking out as more people re-assess their priorities and explore different ways of thinking about and living their lives. However, it is not yet clear that these fires will grow and spread. Other evidence suggests most people are responding to perceptions that life is getting grimmer by turning away from engagement with the wider world and inwards on their own existence.

Social researcher, Hugh Mackay, says the big theme of Australia today is insulation (Mackay 1998). “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.” This withdrawal might be an understandable response, but it comes at a price – one which is being paid mostly by young people, and one which will become even higher for future generations.

The more fundamental issues I have raised are not the issues that governments are concerned with. There seems to be a disjunction between our broad social experience and a narrower political agenda, as if they exist on different planes of perception. Somewhere in the translation of social concerns into political issues an awful lot gets distorted or lost altogether.

So the impetus to change will not come from our leaders, but from ordinary people. This is where the ‘big picture’ I have been discussing and our personal lives intersect. This is from where we draw our power. 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.

### **Conclusion**

Shaping the future to human needs means redefining what we mean by ‘progress’. Do we continue to equate progress with increasing standard of living and material wealth, which is ecologically unsustainable? Or do we equate progress with improving quality of life and total well-being - physical, mental, social and spiritual - which can be sustainable?

Changing the definition might seem a simply task, but it is immensely difficult. Growth is central to our economic system, and material progress lies at the heart of our culture - a culture powerfully reinforced by the mass media, marketing and advertising. To redefine progress means posing and discussing, much more openly and critically than we have, questions like:

- What do we want from life? (What is its purpose? What makes a better life?)
- How do we best get what we want? (Is it through continuing economic growth and material progress of the sort we now have?)
- What values will promote what we want, and discourage what we don't?

We will have to work out the answers to these questions ourselves, personally and as a society, before we can expect government, business and other institutions to reflect them in their policies, programs and products. Ultimately, how effectively we address many of the issues currently dominating public and political debate hangs on our answers to these questions.

Whether we look at the progress of nations very broadly, or focus on the well-being of young people, the evidence suggests the need for profound change, for a new view of ourselves in the world. The decades ahead promise 'tectonic' shifts in global civilisations - possibly cataclysmic, maybe drawn out, so that their true significance will only become apparent from a future, historical perspective. To borrow from chaos theory, how we respond in little ways today could have big outcomes tomorrow. How we choose to live affects the world - there is no escaping that - so we should choose to live to change the world.

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