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## **The challenge of post-materialism**

*Richard Eckersley wonders when enough is enough.*

*The Spectator* magazine claimed last year that ‘we live in the happiest, healthiest and most peaceful era in human history’. 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 in his 2001 book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the real state of the world*. That we live in such a ‘blessed’ era is usually credited to material prosperity resulting from economic growth.

Australian governments give over-riding priority in public policy to economics, believing economic growth to be the basis for improving the wellbeing of the Australian people. This position is regarded as a ‘policy constant’ that is largely beyond scrutiny or debate. The Prime Minister John Howard made much of his Government’s economic record during the last election campaign, claiming repeatedly that a strong, growing economy was critical to Australia’s future. In his ‘Getting the big things right’ speech last July, he said: ‘Maintaining a strong dynamic and growing economy is the...overriding responsibility of government’ (along with, now, national security and defence).

At a World Economic Forum dinner in Melbourne in 1998, Howard stated unequivocally: ‘The overriding aim of our agenda is to deliver Australia an annual (economic) growth rate of over four per cent on average during the decade to 2010.’ This is a bipartisan position: former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating said that if you couldn’t grow the economy at over four per cent a year, ‘you might as well give the game away’.

There are, on the face of it, good grounds for the equation of more with better. Today, many more people are living much richer, longer lives than ever before. In the year 1000, there were about 270 million people in the world who, on average, could expect to live about 24 years and earn about US\$400 a year (in today’s dollars). Today there are over 6 billion people on earth who, on average, can expect to live about 67 years and earn almost US\$6,000 year. All parts of the world have shared in the gains. 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.

The primacy of growth is at the heart of the concept of material progress, which regards economic growth as paramount because it creates the wealth necessary to increase personal freedoms and opportunities and to address social and environmental problems such as unemployment, poverty, crime, pollution, land degradation and global warming. In public policy terms, economic growth means more revenue, bigger budget surpluses, and so more money to

spend on more or bigger programs on social welfare, industry support and environmental protection.

As Howard said in his July address: ‘If we can sustain our overall growth rates...we will be a \$1 trillion economy in around seven years time [compared to more than ten years at previous rates]...By 2015, the difference in national income would be about \$135 billion a year in today’s dollars. That’s a difference of an extra \$12 billion a year for health and more than \$8 billion for education at current spending patterns...’

This approach effectively treats growth processes as, at worst, socially and environmentally neutral. But if, in creating wealth, we do more damage to the fabric of society and the state of the natural environment than we can repair with the extra wealth, it means we are going backwards in terms of quality of life, even while we grow richer. Furthermore, it is doubtful that we can compensate for the costs of growth in this way. The costs are not just material or structural – social inequality or environmental degradation, for example – but also cultural or ethical. In other words, material progress depends on the pursuit of individual and material self-interest that, morally, cannot be quarantined from other areas of our personal and social lives.

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 such as Australia. Against the gains we have to set the following qualifications:

- 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 of which have real and potentially immense implications for human health and wellbeing, and so for quality of life in Australia.

- The destruction of the natural environment of which we are an intrinsic part. However much we seem to be able to address local and regional impacts through increased wealth and technological innovation, the evidence suggests we are disrupting planetary systems on a scale that grows ever greater and more pervasive.
- Increasing inequality, sustained high unemployment, the growth in 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 that relate to what might be called meaning in life – having a sense of purpose, autonomy, identity, belonging and hope.

I have focused in my own work on the last point. The costs to wellbeing of these psychosocial impacts are evident in public perceptions of quality of life in Australia; trends in the health of young people; and the effects of cultural qualities such as materialism and individualism on psychological wellbeing.

Public attitude surveys 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. We yearn for a better balance in our lives, believing that when it comes to things like individual freedom and material abundance, we don't seem 'to know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

For example, an Australian study by sociologist Michael Pusey found over a half of those surveyed felt quality of life was falling, with the most common reasons given being, in order: 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. Most people believed family life was changing for the worse, citing 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.

While most young people are resilient and are adapting to changing social conditions, adjusting goals and expectations to suit their times, an increasing proportion of young people are suffering. The adverse trends in young people's health range across physical problems such as obesity and diabetes to psychological illnesses such as depression, and from relatively minor but common complaints such as chronic tiredness to rare but serious problems such as suicide. One fifth to one third of young people today are experiencing significant psychological stress and distress.

The psychological literature suggests powerful effects of culture on psychological wellbeing. Take materialism – attaching importance to money and possessions – which underpins our consumption-based economy. Materialism (or consumerism) breeds not happiness but dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation. Human needs for security and safety, competence and self-worth, connectedness to others, and autonomy and authenticity are relatively unsatisfied when materialistic values predominate. In short, the more materialistic we are, the poorer our quality of life.

Individualism – placing the individual at the centre of a framework of values, norms and beliefs - is another cultural quality with profound significance for wellbeing, but here the evidence is contradictory. Wellbeing is associated with several qualities that individualistic societies should encourage, notably personal control and self-esteem; individualism is, after all, supposed to be about freeing us to live the lives we want. The reality, however, may be very different.

Individualism's downsides are described in different ways (not all of which are necessarily compatible or reconcilable). There is a heightened sense of risk, uncertainty and insecurity and a lack of clear frames of reference; a rise in personal expectations, coupled with a perception that the onus of success lies with the individual, despite the continuing importance of social disadvantage and privilege; and a surfeit or excess of freedom and choice, which is then experienced as a threat or tyranny.

One of the effects of these developments is that individualism not only reduces social connectedness and support, but also diminishes personal control, including through confusing autonomy with independence. The more narrowly and separately the self is defined, the greater the likelihood that the social forces acting on us are experienced as external and alien. The creation of a 'separate self' could be a major dynamic in modern life, impacting on everything from citizenship and social trust, cohesion and engagement, to the intimacy of friendships and the quality of family life.

An important means by which cultural qualities such as individualism and materialism affect wellbeing is through their influence on values. Most societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. 'Virtues' are concerned with building and maintaining strong, harmonious personal relationships and social attachments, and the strength to endure adversity. 'Vices', on the other hand, are about the unrestrained satisfaction of individual wants and desires, or the capitulation to human weaknesses.

In undermining, even reversing, these 'universal values', we weaken the personal relationships, social roles and spiritual beliefs that are central to wellbeing. In making meaning in life more individualised and materialistic, we reduce social cohesion, confidence, trust and stability, and leave ourselves personally more isolated and vulnerable. This, in turn, reduces the hold on people of any moral code, which depends critically on these ties for effect, for tangible expression in behaviours. So there are complex feedbacks in the social effects of growth.

Government policy gives priority to high, sustained economic growth but leaves the content of growth largely to individuals, whose personal consumption makes the largest contribution to growth. This ever-increasing consumption is not just a matter of freedom of choice; it is culturally 'manufactured' by a massive and growing media-marketing complex. For example, big business in the United States spends over a US\$1000 billion a year on marketing – about twice what Americans spend annually on education, from kindergarten through graduate school. This spending includes 'macromarketing', the management of the social environment, particularly public policy, to suit the interests of business.

This conjunction of government policy and corporate practice is distorting personal and social preferences. Psychologists who have studied cults and mind control warn that even the brightest and best of us can be recruited or seduced by social situations and conditions to behave in ways contrary to our values and dispositions, to engage in actions that are immoral, illegal, irrational and self-destructive. As American psychologist Philip Zimbardo has said, many agents of mind

control 'ply their trade daily on all of us behind many faces and fronts'; we need to learn how to resist them and to weaken their dominance.

In academia and public-policy NGOs, within supra-national bodies such as the UN, OECD and World Bank, and among the public - if not within national governments - there is a growing, and more critical, examination of the role of growth in human development. In recent years, both the OECD and the World Bank have acknowledged the need to place more emphasis on the quality – or content – of growth. Vinod Thomas, the lead author of a 2000 World Bank report on *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'.

So the core issue is not a question of being pro-growth or anti-growth, but of seeing that growth itself is not the main game. We need to refocus on the end – quality of life - not the purported means - growth. Quality of life can be defined as the opportunity to experience the social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions that are conducive to total wellbeing – physical, mental, social, spiritual.

For all these reasons, then, material progress is increasingly being challenged by a new view of the world based on sustainable development. 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. We can also characterise the change 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.

The key challenge of sustainable development has usually been seen as reconciling the requirements of the economy – growth – with the requirements of the environment – sustainability. However, our growing understanding of the social basis of health and wellbeing can shift this perspective, so 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. While human health is not the only consideration here, it is critical to achieving a real political commitment to sustainable development.

When I ask very different, but mostly well-educated, professional or student audiences how they line up on this issue, the proportions choosing sustainable development over material progress usually range from a large minority to a substantial majority (in several audiences, the vote has been unanimous, or close to it). People are relieved that these big issues are being examined and discussed, so affirming their own deep doubts about society's direction. Many feel isolated because they don't see these doubts echoed in the mainstream media and in political debate.

Behind such anecdotal evidence is a growing body of research findings and scholarship suggesting that the challenge to material progress is both deep and wide. Studies by American researchers Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson reveal that a quarter of Americans are ‘cultural creatives’, people who have made a comprehensive shift in their worldview, values and way of life. Surveys in European Union countries suggest there are at least as many cultural creatives there. ‘They are disenchanted with “owning more stuff”, materialism, greed, me-firstism, status display, glaring social inequalities of race and class, society’s failure to care adequately for elders, women and children, and the hedonism and cynicism that pass for realism in modern society.’ Instead, they are placing emphasis in their lives on relationships, communities, spirituality, nature and the environment, and real ecological sustainability.

Cultural creatives 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, less than five per cent of the population was making these momentous changes. In just over a generation, that proportion has grown to 26 per cent. ‘That may not sound like much in this age of nanoseconds, but on the timescale of whole civilisations, where major developments are measured in centuries, it is shockingly quick.’

The ‘cultural creatives’ trend is consistent with the views of American sociologist Ronald Inglehart. Drawing on surveys of people in the United States and several European nations since 1970, he found a pronounced shift from ‘materialist’ to ‘postmaterialist’ values. The trend is one aspect of a broader shift from modern to postmodern values taking place in advanced industrial societies. Postmaterialists are still interested in a high material standard of living, but take it for granted and place increasing emphasis on the quality of life. ‘The economic outlook of modern industrial society emphasised economic growth and economic achievement above all,’ Inglehart says. ‘Postmodern values give priority to environmental protection and cultural issues, even when these goals conflict with maximising economic growth.’

While Australians haven’t yet been measured for their ‘cultural creativity’, a study by the Australia Institute suggests the proportion of cultural creatives here is likely to be similar to that in the United States and Europe, perhaps even higher. It found that 23 per cent of Australians aged 30-59 had ‘downshifted’ in the past ten years: that is, voluntarily made a long-term change in their lifestyle that had resulted in their earning less money. This proportion excludes those who retired, returned to study, set up their own business or left work to have a child. If some of the excluded are included as legitimate downshifters, along with those who have opted for a ‘cultural creative’ lifestyle from the beginning, the proportion of Australians who are challenging the dominant culture of our times is likely to be substantially higher.

Still, these civilisational shifts are not necessarily straightforward and one-dimensional. We don’t have a fixed quantum of social energy so that if pressure mounts in one area, it must ease in another. Pressures can rise in several conflicting realms, increasing social tensions. More people are disenchanted with consumerism, yet we continue to consume more. There are contradictions in the evidence about social preferences and directions. These reflect the inevitable incompleteness of any study, a focus on only part of the story; they also reveal the very real ambivalence in people’s minds and the state of flux in modern societies. All in all, most

people may still be obeying the cultural imperative to consume, but growing numbers are opting out of a way of life they feel is becoming increasingly destructive to health and wellbeing, both personally and socially.

The sociological literature suggests an emerging moral autonomy lies behind this cultural transformation. One of the most exciting ideas to emerge from recent postmodern scholarship is that we have the opportunity, however small, of becoming truly moral beings, perhaps for the first time in history. That is, we have, each of us, the opportunity to exercise genuine moral choice and to take responsibility for the consequences of those choices, rather than accepting moral edicts based on some grand, universal creed and handed down from on high by its apostles.

British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes: ‘The denizens of the postmodern era are, so to speak, forced to stand face-to-face with their moral autonomy, and so also with their moral responsibility. This is the cause of moral agony. This is also the chance the moral selves never confronted before.’ Linked to this new moral autonomy may be the emergence of a more socially responsible and engaged individualism. Action is still a form of self-expression, but it is framed and shaped by a wider social context. These new orientations create ‘something like a cooperative or altruistic individualism,’ say German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim. ‘Thinking of oneself and living for others at the same time, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal, substantive connection. Living alone means living socially.’

Moral philosopher Denis Kenny says all moral orientations and theories spring from one or other cosmology, or conception of the universe. When the cosmology of a society changes so does its morality. But shards of older moral traditions can persist, even for centuries. Over more than 100,000 years of human history, we have inhabited four quite different universes, he says:

- *The enchanted universe*: a world alive with forces, powers and influences, often personified as gods, which toyed with people’s lives; it lives on in New Age beliefs.
- *The sacred universe*: the universe of Christianity, a world created by God; ‘the first comprehensive, fully integrated theory of everything in human experience’.
- *The mechanical universe*: the universe of Newtonian physics; a world that runs like clockwork according to a set of physical laws.
- *The organic universe*: the universe of Einstein, relativity and quantum physics; a cosmic dance of energy in which the distinction between the material and spiritual no longer make much sense; ‘the first universally valid and scientifically based cosmology in the history of human consciousness and culture.’

Now we are on the threshold of a fifth cosmology, Kenny says: *the creative universe*, the universe as a self-organising and creative process; ‘the human species is given the opportunity to take full control of our future’. Rather than searching for meaning, we will create it by taking responsibility for the design of our personal, social and planetary future. In this design, there is no fixed point to satisfy our longing for ultimate foundations, he says. Apart from outdated

religious and philosophical traditions, the most formidable obstacle we face to the exercise of moral and political responsibility is ‘the imperial ambition of the global market’ whose foundations and justification ‘lie in obsolete cosmology of the mechanical universe’.

Kenny states that the paradoxical consequence of the great scientific enterprise of the past 500 years is not that we have finally uncovered the laws of being, but that we have discovered a cosmic narrative that leaves us holding the baby of the evolutionary future. ‘We are all now faced with a radical moral choice. We can step confidently into a new realm of creative freedom and take full, democratic responsibility for that future, or, alternatively, retreat into a blind and irresponsible dependence on moral authorities who...will confidently claim that they have a mandate from God, nature, history or the market to define that future for us.’

The many paradoxes and ambiguities we encounter when we examine ‘the big picture’ of human life today reflect not just its inherent complexity and our incomplete understanding of it, but also parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic struggle as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail, and new ways of being human strive for definition and acceptance.

In essence, this struggle involves a shift away from the current worldview framed by material progress and based on self-interested, competitive individualism, which has created ‘shallow’ democracy (for example, voting every few years for whoever promises us the biggest tax cut) and reduces social cohesion, weakens families and communities, and so diminishes quality of life and wellbeing. Replacing this construction is a new worldview framed by sustainable development and based on altruistic, cooperative individualism, which will give rise to ‘deep’ democracy (embodied in all aspects of our lives), greater social cohesion, strong communities and families, and so heightened quality of life and wellbeing.

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*Note: Some editorial changes may have been made to published version.*