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**PROGRESS, SUSTAINABILITY AND HUMAN WELLBEING:
IS A NEW WORLDVIEW EMERGING?**

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Abstract

The human condition today is marked by paradox and contradiction. This situation reflects not just its inherent complexity and our incomplete understanding of it, but also parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic contest as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail, and new ways of being human struggle for definition and acceptance. The dominant worldview of material progress, which gives priority to economic growth and a rising standard of living, is being challenged by a worldview based on sustainable development, with its aim of balancing social, economic and environmental goals to create a high, equitable and lasting quality of life. Our growing understanding of the social basis of human health and happiness can make an important contribution to this contest by allowing different priorities to be measured against a common goal or benchmark – improving human wellbeing.

Introduction

Those who debate the future of the world and the fate of humanity are usually divided into optimists and pessimists. They might better be labelled linear optimists and systemic optimists. Linear optimists believe we are 'on track' to a better future, and that the problems we face are mere 'glitches' we can iron out of the system. Systemic optimists, on the other hand, argue that we are straying ever further off the track and that current problems are symptoms of a deeper condition which must be addressed through whole-system change.

The Spectator magazine recently claimed that 'we live in the happiest, healthiest and most peaceful era in human history' (Hanlon, 2004). And if now was good, the future would be even better. The belief that we live in the best of times has been most famously, and contentiously, articulated in recent years by Bjorn Lomborg (2001) in *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. He concludes that mankind's lot has improved vastly in every significant measurable field and that it is likely to continue to do so. That we live in such 'blessed' times is usually credited to material prosperity resulting from economic growth. Economist Diane Doyle (2004), writing in *New Statesman*, said that since the dawn of capitalism, this had been the big question: 'Why do capitalist economies grow? What can people do, collectively, to encourage economic growth, given that it brings benefits such as longer life expectancy, better health and improved opportunities for personal development?'

In this paper, I want to challenge the proposition that life is unequivocally getting better as a result of increasing material wealth. My frame of reference is social and cultural, rather than political and economic. I define progress – 'making life better' - in terms of quality of life, health and wellbeing in the broadest sense, using the terms somewhat interchangeably. Quality of life is the extent to which people enjoy (or societies provide) the living conditions (social, economic, cultural and environmental) that are conducive to total health and wellbeing (physical, mental, social and spiritual). Quality of life is both objective and subjective, as much a question of how we feel about our lives as about the conditions in which we live.

I begin by describing the political importance accorded to economic growth, and its rationale. I question this emphasis on several grounds: the relationship between wealth and wellbeing, at both national and individual levels; patterns and trends in population health; public perceptions of quality of life; the health impacts of environmental change; and trends in alternative aggregate measures of progress. I then outline the need for a transition from material progress to sustainable development as 'the defining idea' of how we improve quality of life and what this means broadly for public policy. Finally I provide evidence that this shift in worldviews may be taking place.

Material progress

Governments often give over-riding priority in public policy to economics, believing economic growth to be the basis for improving the wellbeing of their people. Progress, relative to the past and to other countries, is primarily measured as the size and rate of increase in Gross Domestic

Product (GDP). This position is regarded as a 'policy constant' that is largely beyond scrutiny or debate. So in my own country, Australia, the Prime Minister John Howard (1998) told a World Economic Forum dinner: '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 reflected in the Government's overall policy objective for Treasury: 'strong, sustainable, economic growth and the improved wellbeing of the Australian people' (Henry 2004). Indeed, Treasury's mission statement is 'to improve the wellbeing of the Australian people'.

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 US\$435 a year (in today's dollars) (Maddison, 2001). 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.

However, 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.

Qualifications and costs of growth

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 (Eckersley 2005). 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.

- 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 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, belonging, autonomy, identity and hope.

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 above 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 high 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, pp. 147-69; Eckersley, Wierenga & Wyn 2006). While their health, when 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. A fifth to a third of young people today are experiencing significant distress at any one time, with some estimates of the prevalence of a more general malaise (headaches, stomach aches, sleeplessness) reaching 50 per cent. Young people are experiencing higher levels of mental health problems than older people, and carrying this increased risk into later life.

The extent to which we are falling short of maximising human wellbeing, despite falling mortality and rising life expectancy and material wealth, has been demonstrated in a large study of adult Americans, which examined mental health not just as the absence of mental illness but as 'a syndrome of symptoms of positive feelings and positive functioning in life' (Keyes 2002). The study 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, they enjoyed good mental health.

Public perceptions of quality of life

Declining quality of life is also apparent in people's perceptions of life today. 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, pp. 105-25). The studies show 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'.

(While I am drawing mainly on Australian, US and UK studies, the generic and fundamental nature of people's concerns about society suggest the findings would, to varying degrees, be true of other Western nations. 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.)

A recent report on 'the mind and mood' of Australians says there is growing concern about the state of Australian society - rougher, tougher, more competitive, less compassionate – that is producing stress, edginess and a feeling of personal vulnerability (Ipsos Mackay 2005). 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 recent Australian survey which included questions asked in 1988 and 1995 studies provides striking evidence of the extent to which economic performance and people's perceptions and preferences are diverging (Eckersley 2006a). Despite a decade-and-a-half-long economic boom that has seen sustained, strong economic growth, declining unemployment, low interest rates and rising incomes, the proportion of Australians saying quality 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 worse 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 between expectations and preferences has widened markedly since 1995. At the same time, 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'.

A 1995 US study, *Yearning for Balance*, underscores Americans' worries about their way of life (Harwood Group 1995). Based on focus group discussions and a national survey, the study found people shared a deep and abiding concern with the core values driving their society and 'the frenzied, excessive quality of American life today'. 'They feel that an essential side of life centred on family, friends and community has been pushed aside by the dominant ethic of "more, more, more", and they are looking for ways to restore some equilibrium.' 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).

Some studies make quite 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 – things many Australians believe are being sacrificed to *increase* standard of living.

Environment and health

If the social and cultural costs of material progress to quality of life were not reason enough to change the way we seek progress, then the environmental costs make the case for a new model even more compelling. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a major United Nations initiative involving more than 1,300 experts worldwide, provides an authoritative, up-to-date and comprehensive overview of the relationship between the environment and health in its health synthesis report (Corvalan et al 2005). It notes that nature's 'goods and services' are the ultimate

foundations of life and health. These provisions range from the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter and clean air and water to less tangible, but highly valued, cultural, spiritual and recreational benefits.

Over the past 50 years, humans have changed natural ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period in human history, the assessment says. These changes have benefited humanity, especially by greatly increasing food production, but about 60 per cent of ecosystem services are currently being degraded or used unsustainably. The causal links between environmental change and human wellbeing are complex, being often indirect, displaced in space and time, and dependent on modifying forces.

Historically, most environmental health problems have entailed specific risks within a local context, such as pollution and contamination. However, over the past two decades the focus of environmental concerns has shifted from local and regional impacts to the way humans are now changing planetary systems and processes, with huge consequences for wellbeing. McMichael (2001) says we must now extend our environmental health concerns to include 'the sustaining of natural systems that are the prerequisite to human survival, health and wellbeing'.

Large-scale threats, whose health effects are already being felt, include (McMichael 2001, pp. 283-317; Corvalan et al 2005): climate change; ozone depletion; degradation and over-exploitation of land, water, fisheries and forests; changes to global cycles of nitrogen, phosphorus and sulphur; biodiversity loss; and chemical contamination of food, air and water. Health-related impacts include: disruptions to food production; more frequent and extreme weather events; inundation and salinisation; the spread of infectious diseases; impaired endocrine function, affecting disease resistance and reproduction; loss of new foods and medicines.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment warns that the dual trends of growing exploitation of ecosystem services and the generally declining condition of most ecosystems are unsustainable (Corvalan et al 2005). There is an increasing risk of 'non-linear changes' in ecosystems, including accelerating, abrupt and potentially irreversible changes. Ecosystem changes may occur on such a large scale as to have 'a catastrophic effect on human health'.

The environmental health literature has focused on the more direct, physical health implications of environmental change – famines, natural disasters and epidemics of infectious disease, for example. However, the social consequences of environmental change and degradation also include growing flows of environmental refugees and escalating conflict over diminishing resources. Ecological losses, embedded in a mosaic of social, economic and political factors, could cause the failure or collapse of entire societies - on a local, regional, continental or even global scale - so magnifying hugely their health costs (Butler et al 2005).

Alternative measures of progress

Given the evidence I have discussed above about the growing gap between economic performance and quality of life, it is not surprising that some researchers have proposed 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 (Max-Neef 1995; Eckersley 2005, pp. 32-35).

The threshold hypothesis has been supported in recent years by the development of indices, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, that adjust GDP for a range of social, economic and environmental factors that GDP either ignores or measures inappropriately. These include income distribution, unpaid housework and voluntary work, loss of natural resources, and the costs of unemployment, crime and pollution. These 'GDP analogues' show that trends in GDP and social wellbeing, 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.

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. As Vinod Thomas, the lead author of a 2000 World Bank report on *Quality of Growth* (Thomas et al 2000) 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'.

Sustainable development

As a result of the growing evidence of its social, cultural and environmental costs, 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.

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways (Eckersley 2005, pp. 234-7). The World Commission on Environment and Development described it as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. The World Conservation Union, the United Nations Environment Program and WWF (formerly the World Wide Fund for Nature) have defined it as 'improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems'.

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 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 quality of life. While wellbeing is not the only consideration here, it is critical to achieving a real political and public commitment to sustainable development.

In shifting from material progress to sustainable development, we need to think less in terms of a 'wealth-producing economy' and more about a 'health-creating society', where health is defined as total wellbeing. We need to pay attention to the content of growth - and the values and priorities it reflects and serves - not just its rate. Most economic growth is derived from increased personal consumption, despite the evidence of its personal, social and environmental costs. We need, individually and collectively, to be more discerning about what economic activities we encourage or discourage. While such suggestions are often dismissed as 'social engineering', this criticism ignores the extent to which our lifestyle is already being 'engineered', or 'manufactured', by a massive and growing media-marketing complex. For example, big business in the United States spends over US\$1000 billion a year on marketing - about twice what Americans spend annually on education, from kindergarten through graduate school (Dawson 2003). This spending includes 'macromarketing', the management of the social environment, particularly public policy, to suit the interests of business.

It is true that recessions and depressions causes hardship, especially through increased unemployment. However, the association between growth and jobs (or other benefits) does not negate the need to examine more broadly and carefully the social effects of growth. Also, we need to bear in mind that the strength of this association is a characteristic of our current economy; we cannot judge possible alternatives by the rules - the internal logic - of the existing system.

Also, to be *against* current patterns of growth is not the same as being *for* failed socialist, centralised, command economies. This common confusion leads to the claim that, whatever its faults, capitalism is the best system we have and we should stick to it until someone invents a better one. This claim confuses means and ends, function and meaning, systems and worldviews - how we do something rather than why we do it. 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.

Changing our defining idea about how to improve quality of life would have far-reaching implications for public policy. The specifics are beyond the scope of this paper, but in essence the change would involve reducing the proportion of GDP derived from *consumption* undertaken for short-term, personal gratification, and increasing that involving *investment* directed towards broader and longer-term social goals. We could choose to redirect economic activity into creating a fairer, cleaner, healthier, safer world. We don't have to keep consuming more in order to generate the wealth to try to fix the problems to which consumption gives rise.

In the face of terrorism, we have not hesitated to direct wealth (and so economic activity) into strengthening defence and national security. The Boxing Day tsunami also saw a large reallocation of resources to help its victims. Confronted with the magnitude and global scale of

twenty-first century challenges – population pressures, environmental destruction, economic equity, global governance, technological change - it simply 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.

American economist Robert Frank (2004) describes this shift in spending as one from *conspicuous* to *inconspicuous* consumption. Conspicuous consumption is like an arms race, an escalation of spending on things like larger houses, better cars and more expensive clothes in order to improve our social status, he says. Inconspicuous goods include shorter commuting, better work conditions, more time with friends and family and more vacations. The list could also be extended to include wider measures of social and environmental quality. Frank says that the evidence suggests wellbeing would be higher in a society with a greater balance of inconspicuous consumption, but that the actual trends have been in the opposite direction.

Wellbeing manifestos published in Australia and the UK note that while governments cannot legislate to make us happy, many things they do affect our wellbeing (Shah & Marks 2004, Hamilton et al 2005). Industrial relations laws can damage or improve the quality of our working lives; government policies can protect the environment or see it defiled; our children's education depends on the quality of schools; tax policies can make the difference between a fair and an unfair society; and the cohesiveness of our communities is affected by city design and transport plans.

The manifestos proposes a number of ways in which a government could and should enact policies to improve national wellbeing: improving working conditions; reducing working hours; protecting the environment (including through increased taxations on damaging activities); rethinking education to place more emphasis on wellbeing; investing in early childhood; discouraging materialism (including through greater regulation of advertising); building communities by supporting families, carers and community organisations; reducing inequality and building public infrastructure and services; and improving measures of wellbeing.

In reviewing the literature on wellbeing, two leading American researchers, Ed Diener and Martin Seligman (2004), say there are 'distressingly large, measurable slippages' between economic indicators and wellbeing, and urge the establishment of a system of national measures of wellbeing to supplement the economic measures. 'Economic measures have seriously failed to provide a full account of quality of life.'

Shifts in public attitude

When I ask very different, but mostly well-educated, professional or student audiences about 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 (2000) 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 were 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.'

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: that is, voluntarily made a long-term change in their lifestyle that had resulted in their earning less money (Hamilton & 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. The means include cutting back work hours, taking a lower-paid job, stopping work and changing careers. The reasons are to spend more time with the family, live a healthier lifestyle, seek more balance or fulfilment, and lead a less materialistic and more environmentally friendly life.

Beyond those who are changing their lives are many more people who are thinking about it. Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay (2003), while noting the social dangers inherent in people's increasing social and political disengagement, says many are using this 'retreat time' to explore the meaning of their lives and to connect with their most deeply-held values. The gap between 'what I believe in' and 'how I live' is uncomfortably wide for many of us and we are looking for ways to narrow it, he says. 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 trends in 'cultural creatives' and 'downshifters' are consistent with the views of American sociologist Ronald Inglehart (2000). 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.'

This values shift is also consistent with a development noted by some sociologists: a new moral autonomy and the emergence of a more socially responsible and engaged individualism (Bauman 1995, p 43; Eckersley 2005, pp. 224-228). 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,' says German sociologist Ulrich Beck (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 162). 'Thinking of oneself and living for others at the same time, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal, substantive connection.' 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.

Nonetheless, 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. Our political and other institutions can respond inappropriately, even dysfunctionally, to pressures for whole-system change (Eckersley 2006b). 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.

Conclusion

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 (voting every few years for whichever political party promises us the best personal deal) and reduces social cohesion, weakens families and communities, degrades the natural environment, and so diminished 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, a healthy natural environment, and so heightened quality of life and wellbeing.

The whole-system change that the transition from material progress to sustainable development represents will not be smooth. Rather it will be messy, difficult, disturbing and protracted, undertaken at many levels and in many different ways, with the eventual outcomes always uncertain. History and legend show that when the gap between the ideal and real becomes too wide, the system eventually breaks down. 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.

At the same time, however, there is growing evidence that the increasing weight of public opinion, scientific evidence and global events are tilting the balance in favour of a new cultural order.

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