

SOCIAL SCIENCE, PUBLIC POLICY AND THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

“I should say that happiness is being where one is and not wanting to be somewhere else.”

Michael Frayn *A Landing on the Sun* (page 151)

A common caricature of academic social scientists is that they are ‘out of touch’. There are at least two aspects to this perceived sense of disconnectedness. One is that the academic social scientists inhabit an ‘ivory tower’, with high walls and a high vantage point that isolates and separates their activities from the everyday lived experiences of ‘real people’. The second is that social scientists have become disengaged from the established structures of policy-making and political decision-making. They prefer to critique, or dismiss, from a detached and distant, if principled position, rather than risking compromising their critical purity of by ‘dining with the devil’ and collaborating with the central state. Over recent years, concern at this latter cleavage among British geographers has prompted a rash of writing on the merits and status of so-called ‘grey geographies’ — research outputs designed to inform and influence public policy (Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Lee, 2002; Peck, 1999). In such debates, fundamental questions soon emerge about the political role of academic research, the functions of the public intellectual, and the social purpose of universities. In the search for first principles, perhaps a unifying starting point could be the aim of maximising well-being — to make life as happy as possible for as many people as possible for as much of the time as possible? Not, of course, unproblematic, but there are worse places to start.

In the United Kingdom, a fascinating government report was slipped out quietly over the Christmas period from the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit on what makes people satisfied with their lives (Strategy Unit, 2003). The report examines survey evidence of contentment, investigates international differences, and explores demographic, social, economic and political factors before reflecting on the policy implications of knowledge on life satisfaction. Although it may, at first sight, be reassuring to know that think tanks at the heart of the British Government concern themselves with understanding the well-being and welfare of their population, readers are curiously, and perhaps rather worryingly, reminded at the top of every one of the sixty-four pages of the report that “this is not a statement of government policy”! Even for those with little interest in the United Kingdom, the many international examples and comparisons presented in this report are worth a look. However, the creation of quasi-academic research units such as this within the heart of a government is an interesting development that is worth closer examination.

The creation of research units and 'think tanks' within national and sub-national governments to both synthesise and summarise what is largely academic work is not new. In the United Kingdom, the Strategy Unit was, until June 2002, known as the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU). The PIU was created in late 1998 as part of a package of reforms aimed to strengthen the centre of government following the election of New Labour. The SU/PIU provides additional, research project-based capacity for the Prime Minister's Policy Unit, based in Number 10 Downing Street, taking a longer-term perspective in its analytical work, to complement the more short-term 'fire-fighting' role that tends to occupy the Policy Unit. A forerunner of this model was the Central Policy Review Staff, established by the then Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1971 to advise the Cabinet on strategic policy issues (Blackstone and Plowden, 1990).

The PIU's aim has been "to improve the capacity of Government to address strategic, cross-cutting issues and promote innovation in the development of policy and the delivery of the Government's objectives" (PIU 1999a, page 132), and it quickly became cast as being in the vanguard of efforts to improve 'joined up government'. The Unit reports directly to the Prime Minister, through the Cabinet Secretary, is primarily project-based in its work, and includes a small central team that helps draw up project proposals, manage the Unit's workload and follow up project recommendations. Projects are carried out by small teams, usually of between four and eight people, including members of the central team and secondees from across government departments and from beyond, including academia. The issues that this unit has concentrated on are often intriguingly of international as well as national importance.

The first set of PIU projects was announced by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in December 1998.¹ These dealt with the development of e-commerce (PIU, 1999b), the ageing society (PIU, 2000a), the workings of central government in the regions and local areas (PIU, 2000b), managing cross-cutting issues in Whitehall (PIU 2000c) and rural economies (PIU, 1999a). The programme of work therefore resonates strongly with many of the concerns of contemporary social science. Indeed, since this first wave of projects, the PIU/SU has gone on to review the social, health and environmental implications of trade liberalisation (PIU, 2000d), the future of UK energy supplies and markets (PIU, 2002) and the policy implications of geographical mobility. It can be argued that these detailed reports provide a far more concise and readable summary of major academic thinking in these areas than the material produced by

academics themselves; albeit with a political/policy agenda lying just beneath the surface of each report.

The study of life satisfaction is revealing in several respects. The work of one academic and his colleagues – Professor Andrew Oswald of the Department of Economics at the University of Warwick is an important influence upon the report. His current dominance of the field, and talents in disseminating his findings (see www.andrewoswald.com), coupled with government's increasing preference for the quantification of research findings results, for instance, in the value of a presumably happy marriage being reported as equivalent to a rise in income of £72 000 per annum. The conundrum that, although more wealth tends to bring greater happiness individually, happiness has not risen in general as nations become wealthier, is partly explained by the detrimental effect of income inequalities on happiness. This at least is the case within Europe. Americans appear, according to the report, to manage to achieve similar levels of life satisfaction to Europeans despite greater inequalities. Perhaps they have become acclimatised to this or their greater overall wealth, power, and social segregation militates against the problems of inequality in the most unequal of nations?

International comparisons of life satisfaction reveal that, while in Britain levels are high and relatively stable, similar measures of satisfaction have risen markedly in Denmark over the last three decades, but fallen dramatically in Belgium. Alternative indices of national well being are detailed in the report ranging from those that adopt a traditional gross national product algebra but incorporate environmental factors, to “genuine progress indicators” that value leisure time and other non-monetary factors, to “social progress indexes” that rather alarmingly include rises in the percentage of the population sharing the same mother tongue, religious beliefs, and racial origins as positive trends (Strategy Unit, 2003, page 57). No comment was made in the report on the value of such socially contentious indices, which presumably represents naivety and oversight rather than any tacit sympathy with such measures. However, the report also illustrates that, when simple quantitative approaches are followed, the gross maximization of human happiness often implies policies that are likely to work to the detriment of minorities. Being tough on ‘criminals’, ‘asylum seekers’, the ‘work-shy’, and so on may serve to make a large number of other people temporarily feel slightly better.

¹ *Hansard Commons Debates* 10 December 1998, Column 277.

Questions of human happiness and life satisfaction often implicitly inform social science, but are rarely made explicit. In particular the darker side of happiness — taking solace in others' misfortune — is rarely studied. The happiness that is derived from living in a large house, having a permanent job, or even a stable relationship may be partly a product of knowing how many others lack such benefits. A similar argument could be made for the less tangible aspects of happiness highlighted in the report. For instance, to what degree are people with particular religious beliefs happier than average because they perceive people without their beliefs as lacking something? Much is said about the politics of envy, but very little on the politics of avarice.

The Strategy Unit's report ends with a series of policy implications divided into three categories: those the authors see as non-controversial, controversial, and more controversial. Among the first group are: subsidising relationships (from funding volunteering schemes to marriage counselling) and improving the welfare state, education, and government information. Among the middle group are suggestions to include happiness measures in cost benefit analyses; to increase democratic involvement through referenda; and to reduce the corruption of government. Among the apparently most controversial group of policy options to maximize happiness are prioritising the welfare of poorer nations; protecting individuals from risk; increasing progressive taxation; increasing leisure time; and reducing the consumption of positional goods (such as luxury cars). What is perhaps most telling about the report and the Strategy Unit's thinking is the threefold categorisation of these policy options. The assumption is that Government would rather see that we became happier through the modification of our personal views and social relationships than to address the social inequalities that are the seeds of much current unhappiness through, for example, progressive taxation. Considering the question of education, on this — according to their categorisation — uncontroversial issue, the report suggests:

“Young people — and adults — can be given information and guidance about the factors that drive life satisfaction. Going one step further, mutual respect, cooperative behaviour and volunteering can be encouraged, while deceit, greed and envy could be actively discouraged” (Strategy Unit, 2003, page 37).

Be cheerful, strive to be happy, but don't worry too much about the thorny and controversial issues of the poorest nations of the world, about inequalities within national societies or between peoples internationally, or about who should be paying more tax. Perhaps the Strategy Unit's report requires more airtime and considered responses than it has thus far attracted.

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