

Letter from Australia

AN ABSURD QUESTION?

M. Ward*

Was he free? Was he happy? The Question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.
WH Auden

Australians abroad are as pleased as any others to hear their homeland praised. The pleasure, it is true, does wane a little if the compliment also alludes to the quality of their spoken English. In Britain this is easily dismissed as the genial banter of mutual insult that binds our nations, but in America the suspicion of having been mistaken for Australians does sometimes linger. Nearly everyone, however, seems to want to visit, and to have high expectations of both the country and its people. The question therefore is how well reality matches this promising image.

Australiophilia, like all good syndromes, exists in two variants. In Type 1, the intensity is simply proportional to the distance between the admirer and the equator. This desire for purifying heat and light is understandable in those obliged to live under clouds so low and so heavy that they have been likened to 'an old grey felt hat'. Type 2 is more interesting as it pictures Australians as happy, laconic optimists. These preconceptions are of course carefully nurtured by the dream merchants of soap opera and tourism, but for those who wish to visit, or even migrate, what is the evidence?

Type 1 needs little meta-analysis. One lengthy lunch on Noosa beach is enough: the touch of soft warm air, the steady thump and slap of surf, the sight of implausibly healthy bodies, the taste of fresh swordfish. No expatriate ever forgets:

Go back to the opal sunset, where the wine
Costs peanuts, and the avocado mousse
Is thick and strong as cream from a jade cow.

To the opal sunset. Even Autumn there
Will swathe you in a raw silk dressing gown,
And through the midnight harbour lacquered black
The city lights strike like a heart attack
While eucalyptus soothes the injured air.

Clive James

Those researching the Type 2 variant have a less eloquent literature at their disposal, and this is also rather sparse, which is surprising for a subject such as happiness, the pursuit of which is ranked, at least by Americans, alongside life and liberty as an inalienable right. Strangely, this science does not even have a name, so hedonometry seems as good as any. Required reading for neophyte hedonometrists includes a valuable review by Michael Argyle,¹ which confirms some truisms but dispels others.

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For instance, the notion which is always appealing to the impecunious, that money cannot buy happiness, does appear to have substance. Above a threshold necessary for life's essentials, the correlation between personal happiness and wealth does not even approach statistical significance, with a very limp regression coefficient of 0.15. Those contemplating marriage will also be enlightened, but possibly disconcerted, by some of the content. This confirms that a spouse and offspring do indeed win gold and silver in the satisfaction steeplechase, but it warns that the course will be fairly rugged. Any pre-nuptial assumption of a smooth climb in cumulative pleasure to an Elysian plateau populated by frolicking offspring is rudely dispelled by the graph (illustrated on page 20); this shows the true jagged 'W' shape of things to come. After an early peak of childless conjugal bliss, contentment declines as mewling infants take marriage by the throat. Restored briefly through the hillocks of primary school pleasure, it then dips into the dark valley of teenage turbulence, but thence recovers as the reins of parental responsibility are gratefully released. The view from an empty nest is apparently as agreeable as that from one not yet filled. Thomas Fuller expressed this more elegantly, if a trifle cynically, over 300 years ago:

Deceive not thyself by over-expecting happiness in the married estate....Remember the nightingales which sing only some months in spring, but commonly are silent when they have hatched their eggs.

But to return to the point - are *Australians* any happier than other nations, and does this have anything to do with national affluence? Apparently not. Dr Argyle plots the happiness of nations against gross national product and once again finds no linear correlation. Nigerians on \$100 *per capita* are as content with their lot as West Germans on nearly \$3,000. Or they were in 1974, so it would be interesting to know if things have changed in the last 25 years. Interesting and possible thanks to a symposium recently held in Canberra.² The central question addressed by this conference was whether the substantial increases in recent years in life expectancy, *per capita* GDP and associated material benefits have generated proportionate increases in satisfaction amongst the beneficiaries. The short answer is probably not. The longer answer is that, as usual, it depends upon how you measure it. Hedonometry has moved on in 25 years, and several new indices are now available, including a count of 'happy life expectancy years.' These 'HLEYS' are derived by multiplying average life expectancy by an 'appreciation of life score' (wherein unity is bliss). On this scale, Australia is a creditable fifth in a league of 48 nations with a score of 59.49. Britons, on 57.91 could thus gain a couple of HLEYS by catching the next Qantas flight, but the really ambitious will have to forsake dreams of balmy breezes, as Iceland tops the league at 62.04. Bulgaria, at

31.57 probably needs a few creative travel agents.

Overall, however, the rather sad conclusion of the conference was that an inverse relation has now developed between economic growth and optimism - the better the GDP the more pessimistic the population. More than half the Australian population now believes that life is *in a general setting* getting worse. Paradoxically, and fortunately however, they still consider life *in a person setting* remains satisfying. This disparity leads to the thought that there is perhaps a gene for happiness. A gene whose expression could be measured not by the IQ but by the HQ - the 'happiness quotient'. Such a gene might explain the ability of some to remain obstinately cheerful in the most dismal of circumstances, and others to be chronically disgruntled despite an abundance of gifts.

If individuals remain happy, but their view of the world does not, then it is necessary to look more closely at the world. Some clues may be discovered perhaps in the 'Silent Majority' surveys which have catalogued the problems voiced by Australians over the last 20 years. In retrospect, the annoyances of the late Seventies such as the length of cords of electrical appliances, and the durability of school textbooks, now seem charmingly benign. These irritations have since been swept aside and replaced by resentment about various inequities, and a loss of trust in community leaders. The contribution of inequity to the pathogenesis of gloom is now measurable in the 'Genuine Progress Indicator' which aggregates various social barometers such as unemployment, crime rates, and levels of access to health care, and which, at least in the USA, has fallen as the GDP has risen. The GPI has not been so widely used in Australia, and if it were, better access to health care and lower crime rates might improve our relative rating, but unemployment and other sources of inequity could also account for some of the local pessimism.

The other source of pessimism, the loss of trust in some community leaders, is striking and disconcerting. Between 1976 and 1997, the percentage of the population trusting politicians has fallen from 21 to 9, lawyers from 43 to 29, bank managers from 66 to 32. Doctors on the other hand have actually increased their rating slightly from 62 to 66, teachers from 56 to 64 and police from 52 to 55. Car salespersons continue to serve as a useful internal standard, maintaining a score of 3%. There is even more sobering news for our politicians in these proceedings. A short while ago, a fiery red-headed comet called Pauline Hanson swept across the Australian political firmament, illuminating the

sky with the politics of resentment, and blaming aborigines and immigrants for numerous woes. She has since sunk below the horizon, but at her zenith she attracted a motley band of followers and won a few seats in the Queensland Parliament. More importantly she provoked some mainstream politicians into nervously singing to the same tune in an attempt to appease an apparently aggrieved population. On page 195, however, is the awful truth for our leaders. If you ask Australians what angers them most, only 6.7% nominate immigrants, whereas 41.9% blame politicians.

The reason for all this pessimism and cynicism is not immediately apparent. It seems unlikely that human nature has changed radically in a couple of decades, so the matter is presumably perceptual. It is therefore tempting to incriminate the engines of perception - the electronic media, especially that new sixth sense, the Internet. Perhaps this vast increase in our ability to peer electronically over our neighbour's fence has uncovered new sources of envy and exposed inequities. Also, television drama, with its insatiable need for simple and instantly recognisable symbols, may be casting doctors, policemen and teachers in heroic roles more frequently than politicians. Few television dramas seem to tackle the complex compromises that politicians must negotiate in practicing 'the art of the possible' and when they do, corruption is all too often the theme and the message.

But putting such speculation aside, we do now have some data with which to appease the evidence-based gods. We can answer Auden's absurd question. In short, Australians do lead slightly happier lives than Britons, and much happier than Bulgarians, but do not fare as well as Icelanders. They now worry less about the cords on their toasters, but more about inequity and the integrity of their politicians. Along with the rest of the world they strive ardently for wealth that will not actually make them much happier, and marry without quite understanding the roller coaster they may be boarding. But the surf, the swordfish, and the Chardonnay are still very good, and we do speak a tolerable form of English.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Argyle M. *The psychology of happiness* London and New York: Routledge, 1987.
- ² Ekersly R. *Edit measuring progress - is life getting better?* CSIRO Publishing, 1998.

CORRIGENDUM

Page 1, line 1 of *Proceedings* supplement No. 6 (*Atrial Fibrillation in Hospital and General Practice*) should read: 'In 1898, James Mackenzie, a general practitioner and cardiologist in Burnley, described atrial fibrillation.'