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# **HAPPINESS**

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**DEBATING MATTERS**  
**TOPIC**  
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**MOTION:**

**“HAPPINESS SHOULD  
BE A KEY GOAL  
OF GOVERNMENT  
POLICY”**

# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The happiness debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Backgrounders**

**Organisations**

**In the news**

## KEY TERMS

Happiness

Hedonic treadmill

Paternalism

Positive psychology

Utilitarianism

# INTRODUCTION

1 of 7

# NOTES

1  
1  
2  
4  
5  
5  
6

‘Happiness should become the goal of policy, and the progress of national happiness should be measured and analysed as closely as the growth of GNP.’ So argues Lord Layard, popularly known as the government’s ‘happiness tsar’ [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. In his influential book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* [Ref: [Amazon](#)] Layard writes: ‘Happiness is that ultimate goal because, unlike all other goals, it is self-evidently good’. A flurry of books, articles, policy proposals and TV programmes have followed, all concerned with pinpointing the causes of happiness (often also referred to as ‘life satisfaction’ or ‘wellbeing’). Much of this interest has been sparked by research which claims to identify a ‘paradox of prosperity’: while over the last 50 years we may have got richer, it’s claimed that we haven’t got any happier. After basic needs have been met, increases in income no longer seem to increase our happiness. Just like if it were a drug, we quickly adapt to having extra money and need to keep on having more to sustain our happiness. In the terms of another popular metaphor, we’re stuck on a ‘hedonic treadmill’ having to run faster and faster just to stay still. As a result, the government has been urged to fundamentally rethink the goals of public policy to take account of the fact that there’s more to life than money. Conservative leader David Cameron [Ref: [Guardian](#)] has vied with Tony Blair [Ref: [Independent](#)] to be associated with the happiness agenda. The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has attracted attention for its attempt to replace GNP with GNH, or Gross National Happiness [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. A BBC TV programme took up the challenge of ‘Making Slough Happy’ [Ref: [BBC](#)] and lessons in positive psychology have even found their way on to the school curriculum [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Both the emerging policy consensus and the underlying research have been disputed,



## THE HAPPINESS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

2 of 7

NOTES

however. While few would deny the desirability of happiness, it doesn't necessarily follow from this that its promotion should be a direct goal of government policy. This raises two related questions: First, can the government promote happiness? Indeed, can happiness be measured and what policies would such research recommend? And, second, should the government set itself this goal, or should individuals be responsible for their own happiness?

## THE HAPPINESS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

### Haven't governments always been concerned with promoting happiness?

The equal right of everyone to pursue their own happiness was a key concern of Enlightenment thinkers. Utilitarian philosophers and social reformers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill argued that government policies should follow the principle of promoting the greatest overall happiness. Today, utilitarianism is back in fashion, but two things have changed. While previously the role of government was seen as being to provide the preconditions for happiness by ensuring a steady increase in economic growth and promoting freedom of choice, today's utilitarians argue the focus should be on the feelings of individuals. The second change, which it's argued makes this first aspiration possible, is that happiness research now lays claim to being a science, fulfilling the utilitarian dream of allowing us to accurately measure happiness.

### Can happiness really be measured?

Lord Layard argues we can avoid the danger of paternalism by basing policies on objective scientific evidence about people's feelings, such as that provided by neuroscience. Instead of promoting freedom of choice as an end in itself we can then ensure that people enjoy a range of choices that will allow them to achieve happiness. Opponents say happiness shouldn't be defined in terms of feelings of psychological wellbeing. Rather, happiness is a by-product of having meaningful goals and attachments in one's life, not something that can be measured, taught or pursued directly. This suggestion of a paradoxical quality to happiness is captured by Mill's idea that: 'Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so'.

### What government policies might make us happier?

Many have been proposed, cutting across the political divide between left and right, including school lessons on emotional intelligence, parenting classes, support for volunteering and work-life balance, tax increases for the rich (whose extra wealth has little effect on their happiness), a ban on commercial advertising to children, extra incentives for marriage and more money to tackle mental illness [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Critics suggest many of these policies interfere with individual freedom and that happiness research often leads to conservative conclusions (it suggests people are happier living amongst people like themselves, for example). They also argue it ignores benefits from increased prosperity, like extra freedom and independence, that aren't reducible to happiness.



### Should the government be concerned with making us happy?

Opponents of the happiness agenda argue it sets up an unattainable goal and ignores how overcoming dissatisfaction can be a spur to social and individual development: true happiness involves taking responsibility for our lives, they say. They also suggest that focusing on people's feelings is a convenient agenda for politicians in search of a Big Idea. However, in the absence of other social goals capable of generating mass support, the self-evident appeal of the pursuit of happiness appears increasingly attractive.



## ESSENTIAL READING

Eureka: now we can legislate for happiness

Stephanie Clark *The Sunday Times* 31 July 2005

Joy divisions

Michael Prowse *Financial Times* 4 March 2005

### FOR

It is not fanciful to make the pursuit of happiness a political imperative

Polly Toynbee *Guardian* 16 June 2006

The happiness principle could change politics

Michael Portillo *The Sunday Times* 28 May 2006

The politics of happiness

Mark Easton *BBC News* 22 May 2006

Happiness and public policy

Richard Layard *BBC News* 17 May 2006

The survival of the happiest

Mark Easton *New Statesman* 24 April 2006

### AGAINST

Against happiness

Paul Ormerod and Helen Johns *Prospect* 1 April 2007

There is no 'paradox of prosperity'

Daniel Ben-Ami *spiked* 5 January 2007

Why happiness is overrated

Stuart Jeffries *Guardian Unlimited* July 2006

Politicians, economists, teachers... why are they so desperate to make us happy?

Frank Furedi *Daily Telegraph* 7 May 2006

4 of 7

NOTES

Why politicians should not be fooled into the promotion of happiness

John Rentoul *Independent* 20 April 2006

### IN DEPTH

The pursuit of happiness in perspective

Darrin M McMahon *Cato Unbound* 8 April 2007

Happiness is always a delusion

Stuart Jeffries interviews Adam Phillips *Guardian* 19 July 2006

The ideas interview: Richard Reeves

John Sutherland interviews Richard Reeves *Guardian* 30 May 2006

A well-being manifesto for a flourishing society

Hetan Shah and Nic Marks *New Economics Foundation*  
1 September 2004



## BACKGROUNDERS

5 of 7

NOTES

How to let happiness find you

AC Grayling *Daily Telegraph* 4 May 2007

The battle for affluence

*Battle of Ideas* debate 28 October 2006

Friday poll: Happiness

*BBC News* 26 May 2006

Can you teach happiness

Richard Woods *The Sunday Times* 23 April 2006

The politics of happiness

Richard Reeves *New Economics Foundation*

LSE Centre for Economic Performance

Richard Layard

Happiness and Public Policy

Will Wilkinson

Ferraris for All

Daniel Ben-Ami

The politics of wellbeing

*Guardian Unlimited*

The happiness formula

*BBC News*



## IN THE NEWS

Happiness lessons to cost council £25,000

*Daily Telegraph* 10 May 2007

Pupils 'need happiness lessons'

*BBC News* 3 May 2007

What can the Danes teach us about happiness?

*BBC News* 17 April 2007

Britons 'are getting unhappier'

*BBC News* 17 April 2007

Low earners top job happiness poll

*Guardian Unlimited* 11 April 2007

Blair challenges Cameron on his 'happiness' agenda

*Independent* 31 March 2007

Happiness is a chat over the fence

*The Sunday Times* 7 January 2007

Iceland and Australia top happiness poll

*Guardian* 28 June 2006

Therapy could 'cut benefits bill'

*BBC News* 19 June 2006

Tories promise to make happiness a priority

*Guardian* 23 May 2006

Happiness levels are on the slide, finds poll

*Daily Telegraph* 3 May 2006

Bhutan's happiness formula

*BBC News* 27 April 2006

Pupils to have a key to happiness

*BBC News* 17 April 2006

Why money doesn't buy happiness

*BBC News* 27 January 2005

Volunteering 'boosts community happiness'

*SocietyGuardian.co.uk* 24 September 2004

The politics of happiness

*BBC News* 20 January 2003

The price of happiness

*Daily Telegraph* 13 January 2002

6 of 7

NOTES



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