

WHAT CRISIS?

Wellbeing and the Australian quality of life

Tim Soutphommasane



percapita



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About the author

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Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Dennis Glover, Rod Glover, David Hetherington and Simon Moodie for their suggestions and comments. Allison Orr also assisted in finalising this paper. All errors and omissions remain those of the author.

About Per Capita

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Introduction

Australians like nothing more than celebrating national success in sport. There isn't the same excitement when it comes to United Nations tables ranking for social progress. And yet last November, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) annual study of global wellbeing placed Australia very close to the top when it came to quality of life in the world. According to the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI), Australia is the second most developed country in the world behind Norway (UNDP, 2010).

This won't come as a surprise to many of us. We all know that Australia is one of the best places in the world in which to live. It is quite rightly the source of national pride. But all this seems a little out of place with some of the regular complaints we hear. So much of our conversation about quality of life reveals a deep anxiety about the state that we are in.

Indeed there is close to public hysteria whenever interest rates rise by a quarter of a percent. We hear constantly about rising costs of energy bills, food and petrol. Or about how much more unpleasant life is given traffic congestion, the state of public services or the rate of population growth. Or about how longer working hours mean there is less and less time that people can spend with their families and friends.

This picture that emerges doesn't seem to accord with a nation that is officially just about the best country in the world in which to live. Why is there such a paradox of progress? Why is it that for all that is clearly going right with Australia we seem so worried that we aren't set to enjoy good times? Have we lost our capacity to be optimists?

This paper examines the state of Australia's quality of life. It is argued that the state of Australian quality of life is strong; any sense of crisis about liveability seems to reflect a mix of misplaced aspirational angst and cultural anxiety. Debates about quality of life would be enhanced by a clearer articulation of the relationship between lifestyle, wellbeing and freedom.

Ultimately, quality of life matters because it highlights those conditions required for individuals to enjoy wellbeing. A good quality of life makes sense only against a background of a philosophical view about the good life. As such, this paper proposes a progressive ethics of wellbeing, built upon a social democratic understanding of social justice and freedom. In contrast to anti-market, Green asceticism on the one hand, and liberal-conservative complacency on the other, a progressive, social democratic approach remains the best equipped to respond to Australians' desire for a good life.



Happiness, wellbeing and quality of life

Policymakers around the world are embracing happiness and wellbeing as priorities like never before. This isn't to say that neither have been important until now. Look no further than the dedication of government to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in the US. If not so explicitly stated, it is a credo that has animated the ideal of good government in just about every liberal democracy. To say that happiness must be a measure of a good life approaches something of an axiom.

Until recently there was little accounting for happiness or wellbeing as such. The measure of social progress has traditionally been economic growth and material prosperity, with GDP per capita the primary measure in comparative studies of development. To be sure, alternative statistic measures of progress have existed for decades, the most notable being the UN's HDI, which is drawn from measures of income, life expectancy and education. But only in the last decade have governments sought actively to incorporate measures other than GDP into its calculations of progress. In 2008, French president Nicolas Sarkozy commissioned a body of leading economists including Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen to consider ways to measure progress in terms beyond economic growth. In late 2010, British prime minister David Cameron announced that the UK Office of National Statistics would develop a national happiness index. The Canadian government, which already polls wellbeing across the country, is reportedly considering a similar initiative.

There hasn't yet been any equivalent move in Australia to that of the French or British, although the Commonwealth Treasury has developed a "wellbeing framework" to support its economic analysis (Commonwealth Treasury, 2004). Certainly, there has been an increasing awareness of the limitations of traditional social indicators to express Australians' quality of life and wellbeing (Gittins, 2010). Since 2002, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has tracked progress in the categories of society, economy and the environment to answer the question, "Is life in Australia getting better?" (ABS, 2010). Over the same period, Deakin University's Australian Centre on Quality of Life has also compiled an index to measure Australian wellbeing and happiness (Cummins, 2010).

What, though, should comprise happiness, quality of life or wellbeing? That the three concepts are often used interchangeably suggests a lack of clarity, even among academic scholars (see, e.g., Veenhoven, 2005). After all, isn't it possible for an individual or society to enjoy high levels of happiness but not necessarily enjoy a high quality of life? The inhabitants of many developing countries, for example, sometimes report higher levels of happiness than their counterparts in more developed ones (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). And might a concept such as quality of life be something that is more culturally determined? That is, something derivative of lifestyle as opposed to a more universal concept such as wellbeing? It doesn't seem possible to provide easy answers.



The dimensions of quality of life

Let's assume for the moment that we can use quality of life, wellbeing and happiness interchangeably (I offer some distinctions later). We can still make a helpful distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of wellbeing. The objective may include measures such as material prosperity (e.g. levels of income), educational attainment (e.g. levels of literacy and numeracy) and good health (e.g. average life expectancy). The subjective encompasses people's satisfaction with their life: it measures the magnitude of positive sentiment.

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index uses a different distinction (Cummins, 2010). It uses two tools to arrive at an overall Wellbeing Index. A Personal Wellbeing Index calculates an individual's wellbeing (based on levels of satisfaction with standard of living, health, achieving in life, personal relationships, safety, community connection, future security, and spirituality or religion). A National Wellbeing Index meanwhile measures satisfaction with social conditions, the economic situation, the environment, business, national security and government. Yet both constituent indices – the personal and the national – are based on *subjective* indicators of happiness. In this respect, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index falls on the subjective side of the debate.

Scholars have observed a cultural divide within the Western understanding of quality of life. Whereas those in Europe, especially Scandinavia, tend to emphasise objective measures of wellbeing, those in the Anglo-American countries have tended to emphasise subjective ones. Much of this divide is born of Anglo-American individualism and, some would say, postmodern relativism. Whether one leads a good or happy life has come to exist "in the eye of the beholder".

Admittedly, some researchers contend that any distinction between the two is ultimately meaningless: objective indicators often involve subjective judgments, while subjective indicators can provide rather direct objective measurements. It makes little sense to discuss quality of life without accounting for the tangible conditions of life as well as individual perceptions. It is commonplace, for example, for American media to visit cities rated lowest in the country in publications such as *Places Rated Almanac* (see, e.g., Savageau, 2007) – which ranks metropolitan areas according to a set of objective criteria including ambiance, housing, jobs, crime, transport, education, health care, recreation and climate – only to find that residents in said cities report an unexpectedly high level of satisfaction with their community. Conversely, subjective wellbeing can't ever be enough. The American philosopher Robert Nozick once famously proposed the thought experiment of the "pleasure machine": imagine if you could simply plug yourself into a machine and experience pleasure (Nozick, 1974). As Nozick highlighted, we would demur to conclude that such a person, though experiencing subjectively satisfying sensations, lived in a condition of happiness. In the same manner, we might also say that subjective experience alone can't constitute a high quality of life. You can't plug yourself into a quality of life machine.

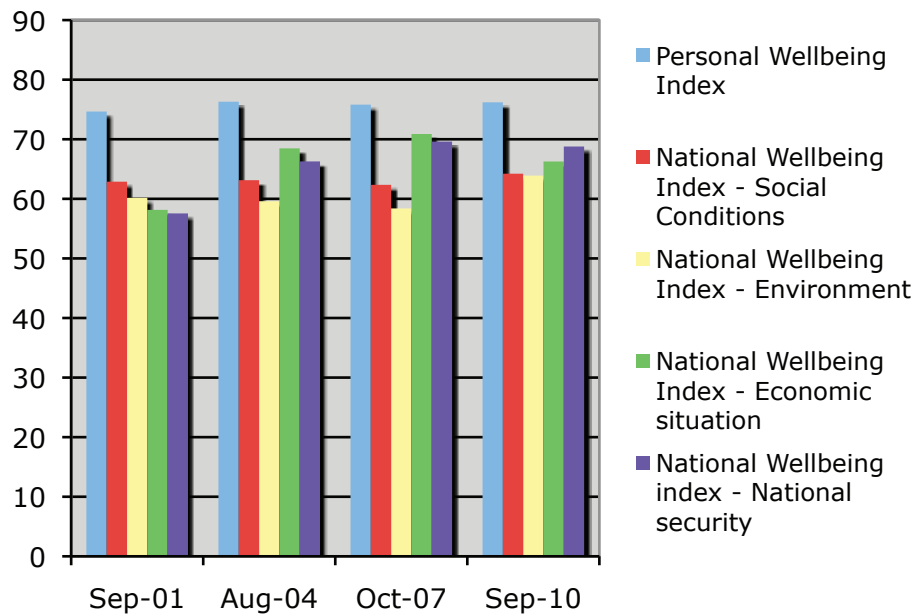


On both objective and subjective measures, the Australian quality of life is high.

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, for example, indicates a consistently high subjective rating of personal well-being among Australians (well within its normal range of happiness for Western societies, defined as 73-76 index points out of a maximum 100).¹ As illustrated in Figure 1 below, reported levels of personal wellbeing hover around 75 index points. (However, reported levels of national wellbeing – covering, for instance, subjective feelings about social conditions, the environment, economic situation and national security – are noticeably lower, suggesting that people feel social progress may not necessarily keep pace with their personal progress.)

Figure 1. Australian Unity Wellbeing Index

Australian Unity Wellbeing Index



The UNDP’s HDI helps put Australian quality of life into some comparative perspective. According to the most recent 2010 index, Australia ranked second only to Norway on measures of schooling, life expectancy and income. As demonstrated in Figure 2, Australian “development” clearly exceeds the OECD average.

¹ For a detailed explanation of the methodology used in this index, see Cummins 2010.

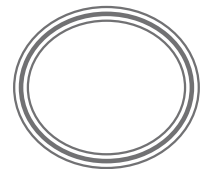
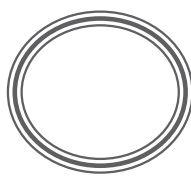
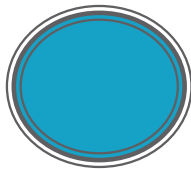
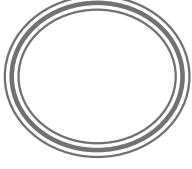
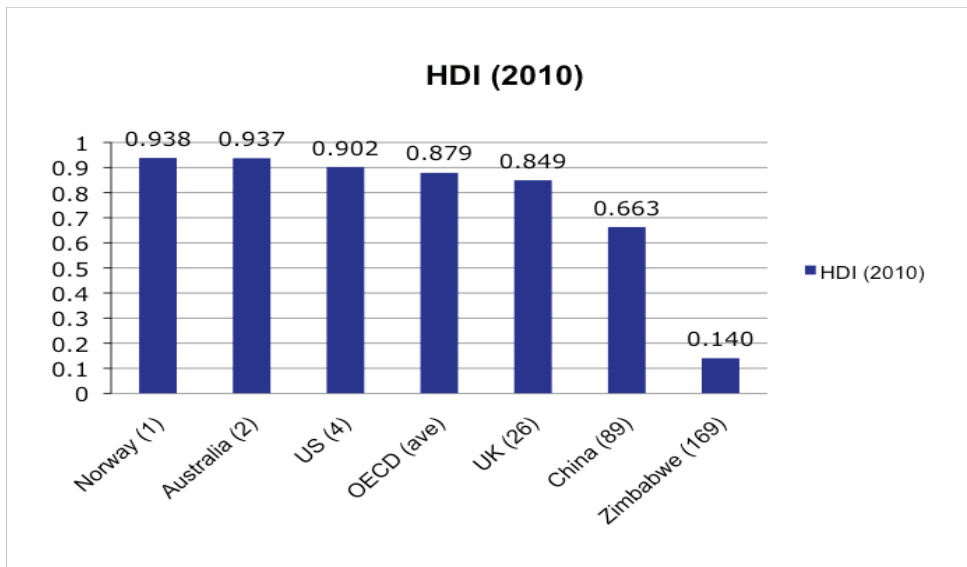
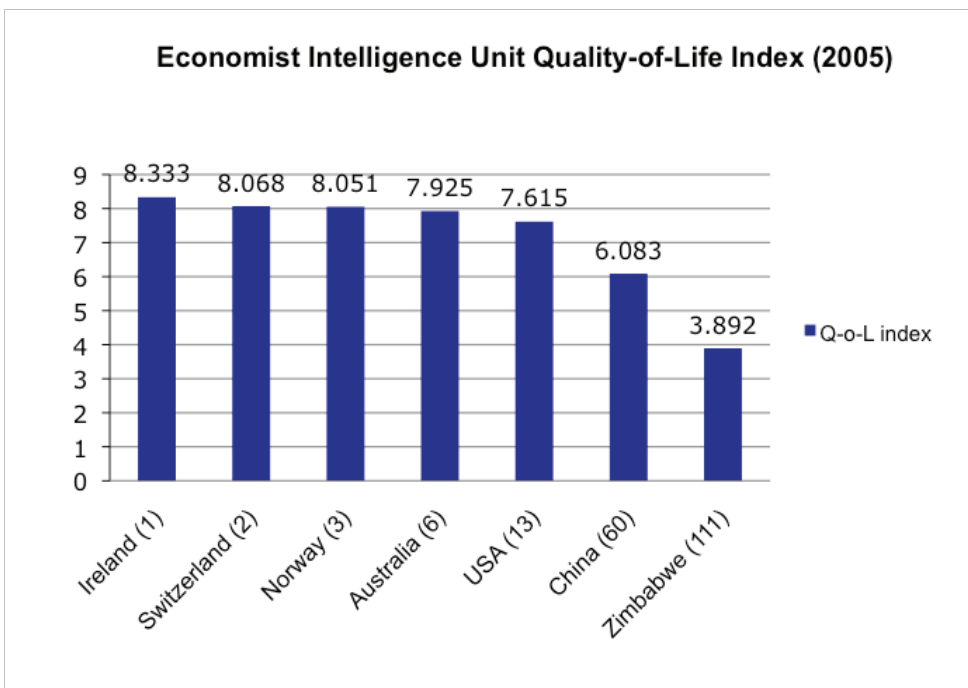


Figure 2. UN Human Development Index 2010



Other studies such as The Economist Intelligence Unit's Quality-of-Life Index (max. 10) again highlight Australia's strong relative performance (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The Economist Intelligence Unit Quality-of-Life Index 2005





Anxiety and Crisis

Despite this, our public conversation seems to suggest a high quality of life is becoming ever more elusive. There are higher expectations and aspirations about what a good life should involve. Our houses are getting bigger. We dine out at restaurants more frequently. Overseas holidays are now the norm and no longer the exception. Expectations about comfortable and prosperous living have become all-consuming (as it were).

A yearning for cultural security complicates any sense of needing to “keep up with the Joneses”. Businessman Dick Smith longs for an Australia, supposedly gone, in which children could play cricket in their backyards, climb trees and roam around “free range” (ABC, 2010). Author and newspaper columnist Peter FitzSimons has written in similar vein about a desire for “a simpler time” (FitzSimons, 2010).

Such sentiments are far from coincidental but rather articulate a troubling sense of loss many Australians feel about a national cultural lifestyle. What comprises this lifestyle? The Australian way of life is understood in terms of a comfortable, carefree existence, characterised by large backyards and low residential density in the suburbs. Australia, as Donald Horne described it some five decades ago in *The Lucky Country*, was the world’s “first suburban nation” (Horne 2005 [1964])

In the eyes of many, the Australian way of life is coming under threat from social and economic change – particularly as generated by population growth. The IPSOS-KPMG *Future Focus* report in 2010, for instance, found that population growth is regarded by a majority of Australians with a mixture of dread, fear and loathing (Huntley and Salt, 2010). Based on their qualitative research, the report’s authors observed:

The issue that triggered the most discussion in our groups was population growth. The notion of ‘approaching 30 million by 2020’ sparked a spectrum of emotions from mild concern to shock and horror. (Huntley and Salt 2010: 27)

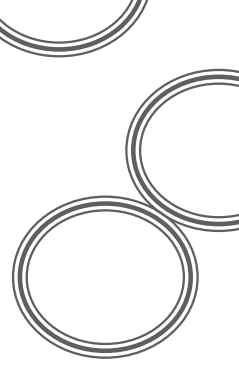
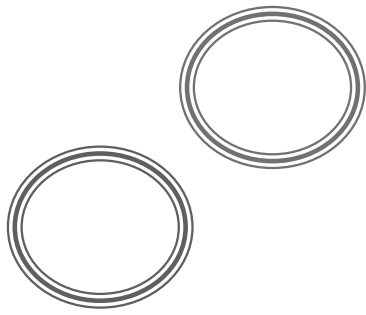
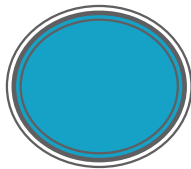
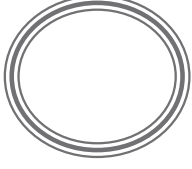
Some direct quotes from the *Future Focus* report help illustrate the feelings the authors detected among their study participants:

Thirty million ... That seems a bit scary. (Huntley and Salt 2010: 27)

Those 30 million people will jam into Sydney, Melbourne, Wollongong ... Where will they live? Look how much we are living out of the city now? (Huntley and Salt 2010: 27)

In 10 years there’s no way we can build an infrastructure to house these people. There’s no way we can support any of this growth. If we go to 30 million – no electricity, water, health. Unless they all move out of the cities. It will definitely sink. We’ll be in a lot of trouble. (Huntley and Salt 2010: 27)

These are sentiments few politicians dare to confront. One of the most telling political developments of 2010 was the rejection of any guiding vision of “big Australia” (with a population of 36 million by 2020), as invoked by



former prime minister Kevin Rudd. One Lowy Institute poll found that 70 per cent of Australians believed the rate of population growth was too high (Hanson, 2010). Upon replacing Rudd as prime minister in June 2010, Julia Gillard made it one of her priorities to retreat from her predecessor's ambitions. She declared Australia would not be "hurtling down the track" to a 36 million-strong population, emphasising she wanted a "sustainable" population. Opposition leader Tony Abbott, a one-time supporter of a high-intake immigration program, abruptly changed his position as well.

The politics of population are, of course, complicated. But in much of the public imagination, the questions of asylum seekers, immigration, and infrastructure meld into one. The population issue has become a proxy for broader social anxieties.

In this sense, any supposed crisis of quality of life in Australia is an imagined one. Any crisis that does exist seems to concern the maintenance not of quality of life, at least as it is understood by objective or comparative measures. Rather, the imagined crisis concerns a mix of two things: (1) misplaced aspirational anxiety – the kind of social angst that exists when prosperity prompts a fear that it may all one day disappear; and (2) a sense of insecurity about Australian culture and identity.

More than a lifestyle

Then again, the Australian conception of quality of life, at least as it is popularly understood, is bound up in a certain cultural lifestyle. The national consciousness has been tied closely with sun and surf, space and suburbs. In recent times, this has been expressed in terms of an imagined Australian *sanctuary* (see Soutphommasane, 2010a). The good life for many involves a nation insulated from a changing and threatening cultural, social and economic world. It is no accident that in the suburban heart of Australia, residential developments assume names such as "Sanctuary Cove" or "Sanctuary Parks" or "Sanctuary Lakes".

Hence, any reduction in the quality of life is more likely to be understood in terms of constricted physical space and overburdened infrastructure: more crowded beaches and buses, greater traffic congestion. Rarely has anxiety about quality of life been expressed explicitly in terms of a lower material standard of living or poorer health. The objection to population growth isn't typically that it will reduce quality of life by compromising economic growth performance. Sure enough, there is no necessary reason to assume that population growth is antithetical to quality of life. The higher urban density that is characteristic of population growth can even enhance aspects of a quality of life by facilitating the exchange of ideas and encouraging clusters of economic growth (Kotkin, 2010).

Some observers may argue that this confirms the long-term shift in western societies towards a form of post-materialist society, where material abundance means social and political conflict is oriented around lifestyle issues (Inglehart, 1977). There is no doubt that matters of lifestyle and wellbeing now feature more prominently in public debates. In the Australian case, uninterrupted economic growth since the 1990s, and the local economy's apparent immunity to the global financial crisis, has only reinforced this trend.



Our cultural understanding of quality of life, anchored in Australia-as-sanctuary, obscures one thing. It leads us to consider quality of life largely in terms of a social *end* – something that is part of the good life that we all strive to attain. But couldn't a higher quality of life also be understood as instrumental in value? Couldn't a good quality of life be a means of achieving something else?

Here, we may begin to question the relationship between quality of life, happiness and wellbeing – a matter I deferred in the earlier sections of this paper. If the three concepts are to be regarded as largely synonymous, we are led to consider quality of life, much like happiness and wellbeing, as end-states to which we should aspire.

An alternative view is to consider the three concepts as distinct in character.

Although happiness and wellbeing are frequently considered one and the same, their usage implies otherwise. Thus it can make sense to say that one feels happy one day, yet unhappy the next; wellbeing, by contrast, implicates the shape of one's whole life (Williams, 2007). Saying that one enjoys a high level of wellbeing is different to saying that one enjoys a high level of happy chirpiness day in, day out. Rather, wellbeing concerns a life of ethical flourishing.²

There is no single way of experiencing wellbeing, but it does connote a number of characteristics in the way people live. While we needn't compile an exhaustive catalogue, few would dispute that those who have a high level of well-being possess self-respect, enjoy respect from those around them, experience fulfilment in their relationships, feel a sense of belonging to their communities, and have the freedom to pursue projects, whether in work or outside it, to which they have some deep commitment (see New Economics Foundation, 2009).

Thus understood, happiness may not be the self-evident purpose of a good life (Layard, 2005), but something derivative of wellbeing. As for quality of life, the concept seems to stand apart from ideas about happiness and wellbeing. If we regard wellbeing as the *end* of seeking the good life, and happiness as a *symptom* of wellbeing, then quality of life may represent a composite measure of the social *conditions* that are required for flourishing (see Figure 4). A good quality of life is a means to an ethical end of living well.

Indeed, why is that we place value on material security, educational attainment, good health, a sense of community, and all other proxies of quality of life? It seems almost superficial to answer merely that it is because we value these things because they reflect the merits of our cultural lifestyle. This shouldn't be understood as either a denial of people's cultural affiliations or a disparagement of them. Many Australians understand our national identity to be expressed in part by our enjoyment of an attractive relaxed lifestyle represented by sport, sun and beach. What we shouldn't neglect, however, is that quality of life is valuable because the things we associate with it provide the background against which we can pursue our conception of the good life.

² I adopt here the phrase "ethical" much as it was used by Bernard Williams (2007) – that is, as designating that realm of concern relating to questions about how to live well. The ethical, in this respect, can't be reduced to the moral: there is more to a good life than being morally good (treating others in accordance with a particular code of rules and duties). The relationship between ethics and morality can be explained thus: morality is a dimension of ethics insofar as treating others in the right way is part of living well.

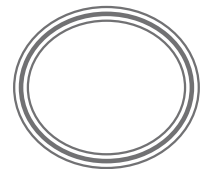
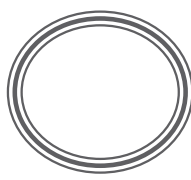
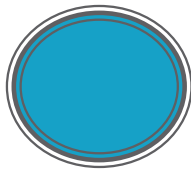
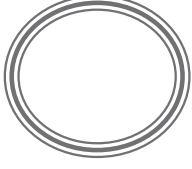


Figure 4. Happiness, Quality of Life and Wellbeing

	Dimension	Ethical Value
Happiness	Subjective	Quasi-instrumental (symptom)
Quality of Life	Subjective and objective	Instrumental (means to an end)
Well-Being	Subjective and objective	Non-instrumental (an end in itself)

The idea of living well

Any discussion of quality of life implicates a philosophical perspective of the good life. When we invoke the terms, we draw upon an often unspoken background of assumptions about living well.

The notion of wellbeing, for instance, draws its lineage from what the ancient Greeks referred to as *eudaimonia*. This concept was given its most extensive expression by Aristotle, for whom flourishing required the attainment of virtues and excellences (Aristotle, 2000). Although the language of virtue has its appeals, we should be wary of embracing it without some qualification. The Aristotelian view understood *eudaimonia* to be predicated upon a *polis* (city or political community), which enjoyed a wide range of agreement on goods and virtues, and which was characterised by a thick bond of friendship between citizens. For Aristotle, ethics (the realm concerning the actions of human beings as individuals) was fundamentally inseparable from politics (the realm concerning the actions of human beings as communities):

The end of politics is the best of ends; and the main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions. (Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics at 1099b30)

The pluralism of contemporary society means such Aristotelian vision is problematic. Many would say it would be paternalistic to suggest not only that the task of politics is to make citizens into better characters, but that such a task should form the heart of any notion of wellbeing. While belonging to a liberal democratic polity implies a certain set of *civic* virtues, which are worth endorsing (see Soutphommasane, 2009), asserting that people must possess a definitive set of *moral* or *personal* virtues in order to live well is more controversial. In any society characterised by a pluralism of beliefs, commitments, lifestyles and practices, it is difficult to insist upon a unity of virtues. People will value different personal excellences and liberal freedom demands that we should, within limits, tolerate such differences.

A modern understanding of wellbeing departs, therefore, from a strict Aristotelian understanding. Though we may speak of the desirability of individuals enjoying certain characteristics that would resonate with *eudaimonia* – things such as political participation, a connection to community life, the possession of knowledge – we would hesitate to conclude that the term wellbeing must represent a single, comprehensive view of a good life. The ways in which people experience the good of communal life, for example, will vary: many will not see politics as the highest expression of social life, as Aristotelians would assert (something



clearly illustrated by levels of political disinterest or disengagement). Similarly, people will value the good of knowledge and education differently: while some may treasure knowledge for its own sake, many others are more likely to value educational attainment as a means for pursuing careers or for securing a higher income.

Does pluralism mean, then, that wellbeing serves limited value as a concept? Or might it be necessary to offer some philosophical or ideological elaboration of what it means to live well?

Wellbeing and social democracy

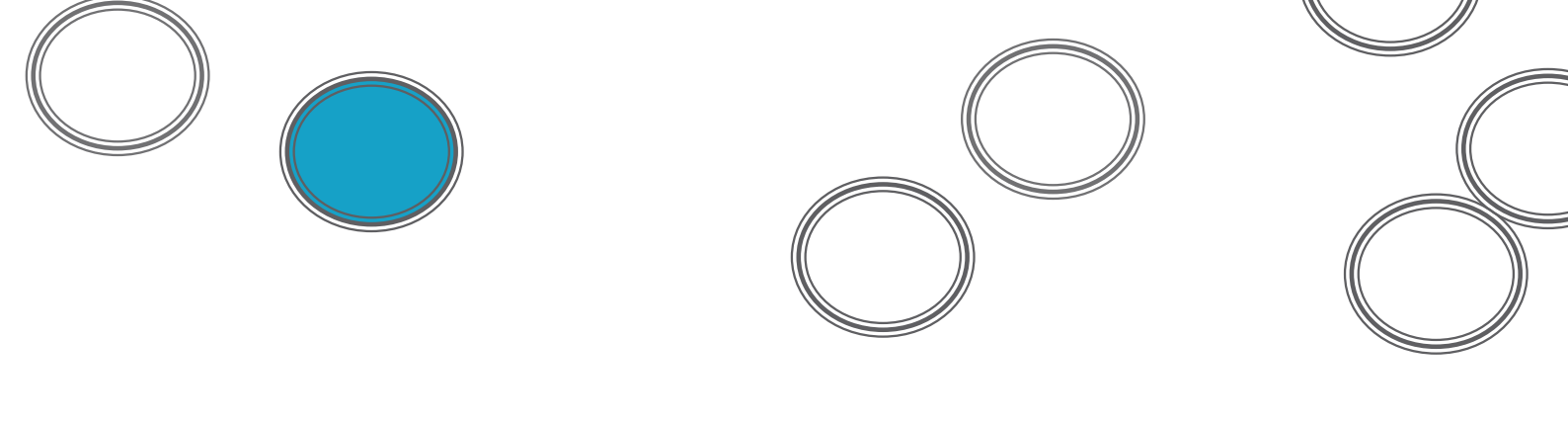
Progressive thought and politics haven't always dealt deftly with the ethical ambivalence of wellbeing. To cite a notable example, Clive Hamilton argues that social democracy is incapable of addressing the question of wellbeing in a modern capitalist society (Hamilton, 2006). The reason, he contends, is that social democracy has traditionally been defined by the struggle against injustice; it has focused on addressing the problem of distributive justice and material deprivation.

According to Hamilton, any progressive politics based on social democracy cannot speak to the modern question of wellbeing, whose defining problem isn't injustice but "alienation". The central task of progressive politics must now be to achieve liberation, rather than equality; to enable citizens to "downshift", rather than to find employment. Social democracy can't deliver this goal and must now be replaced with a new, Green-tinged politics of wellbeing.

A politics of wellbeing would give priority to fulfilling work and help citizens to reclaim their time. It would encourage vibrant, resilient, sustainable communities and help people develop the skills to build stronger family relationships. It would wind back the process of commercialising educational institutions and insist that schools and universities be devoted to improving the physical, emotional and moral health of young people, rather than certifying them for the workplace. It would not hesitate to counter the forces that spread growth fetishism ... (Hamilton 2006: 62)

Such dismissal of social democracy is misguided. Although a good deal of social democratic thought has been preoccupied with questions of justice, this was never divorced from matters of wellbeing. Namely, issues of justice and deprivation were considered important precisely because they concerned the *resources* required for individuals to pursue their version of the good life.

In any case, a just society was never strictly defined by equality. As Anthony Crosland made clear in *The Future of Socialism* – regarded by many as the defining revisionist text of English-speaking social democracy – the measure of a more just society was not whether there is "a greater equality of real incomes" but "greater equality in manners and the texture of social life" (Crosland, 2006 [1956]). It mattered, for Crosland, that the style of life saw improvement. Writing in Britain during the 1950s, he argued that the Left should support the removal of restrictions on an individual's private life and liberty – the divorce laws, the licencing laws, the penalties for homosexuality, the censorship of books and plays, the restrictions on equal rights for women. He called for a greater emphasis on private life, freedom, culture, beauty, and leisure. Crosland didn't use the phrase, but only the best possible quality of life was good enough for working people:



We need not only higher exports and old-age pensions, but more open-air cafes, brighter and gayer streets at night, later closing hours for houses, more local repertory theatres, better and more hospitable hoteliers and restaurateurs, brighter and cleaner eating-houses, more riverside cafes, more pleasure-gardens on the Battersea mode, more murals and pictures in public places, better designs in furniture and pottery and women's clothes, statues in the centre of new housing estates, better designed street-lamps and telephone-kiosks, and so on ad infinitum. (Crosland 2006 [1956]: 402-03)

These things mattered for Crosland because he understood that the ultimate end of justice and equality was the improvement of people's lives. A just society was one in which the circumstances of your birth or family or class didn't determine your station in society, or preclude you from seeking to fulfil your potential as an individual. While the likes of Hamilton say social democracy can't account for notions of wellbeing and quality of life, leading social democratic thinkers such as Crosland were already writing about them more than 50 years ago.

Closer to home, an Australian version of post-Second World War social democracy was always more far-reaching than simple equality. Nowhere was this given such clear expression than in Gough Whitlam's philosophy of "positive equality". Whitlam defined this as an approach that assumed that "a citizen's real standard of living" – encompassing good health, opportunity for education and self-improvement, access to employment and to recreation, culture and political participation – wasn't determined by income alone. For the purposes at hand, what is striking is the language Whitlam employed:

The quality of life depends less and less on the things which individuals obtain for themselves and can purchase for themselves from their personal incomes and depends more and more on the things which the community provides for all its members from the combined resources of the community. (In Freudenberg 1977: 75-76)

There has, in other words, been a deep, long-standing connection between social democratic politics and wellbeing. This has been conveniently dismissed by those seers predicting the onset of a new Green progressive politics.



A progressive ethics of freedom

Critiques such as Hamilton's should nonetheless be welcomed. They highlight the need for progressive social democrats to speak more directly to concerns about wellbeing, happiness and quality of life. There is no cause for timidity: social democracy remains the most comprehensive vehicle available for addressing such matters (Judt, 2010).

Granted, the terrain of quality of life and wellbeing remains contested. Some progressives, sympathetic to Hamilton's prognosis, associate wellbeing and quality of life with moralistic, anti-market, Green asceticism. However, this needn't be the case. Without denying the importance of sustainability, material prosperity remains a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of social progress. It verges on perverse to declare that the fight for social justice is now complete, not least when there remains in this country something of a permanent social underclass in the form of indigenous Australia. And among other things, downshifting isn't a luxury available to those whose income falls in the bottom fifth of our income distribution.

Meanwhile, those on the Right adopt either of two stances. Those who identify more closely with ideological neo-liberalism tend to dismiss the need for conceptions of wellbeing that go beyond just measures of economic growth. Progress, on the neo-liberal view, remains best attained by removing all impediments to perfectly free markets. Those more inclined towards social conservatism, by contrast, tend to co-opt notions of quality of life to advance popular feelings of cultural nostalgia. But in either case, those on the Right fail to offer a satisfactory philosophical view of quality of life or wellbeing – they tend to lapse into either free-market dogmatism or reminiscences of a former golden age.

Progressives need to offer clearer language and aspiration in debates about quality of life. The current absence of such things makes it easy for quality of life to assume something of a protectionist character (especially when aligned with rightist social conservatism) or alternatively a vehement anti-market aesthetic (as with Green progressives). The former is particularly the case. That the phrase quality of life is frequently invoked without further elaboration means it is often reduced to just a synonym for popular suburban lifestyle.

Articulating a progressive ethics on quality of life should begin, as I have suggested, with a distinction between means and ends. A good quality of life is important not in and of itself. It is important because it represents the conditions individuals require to flourish as human beings.

Accounting for this requires progressives to revise some of their language of social justice. There is some truth to the criticism that progressive discussions about social justice have tended to focus too heavily on the fairness of institutions and on the distribution of economic resources (see Soutphommasane, 2010b, and Figure 5). As the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen highlights, our vision may rightly be trained on the materials of justice, but it is important to understand these in terms of the *capabilities* that individuals have to do things he or she has reason to value (Sen, 2009). We should never forget that goods such as income and wealth, respect and recognition, are instrumental in value. The true criterion of progress is improvement in "the actual opportunities" of living, or what Sen calls "substantive freedom" (a person's actual ability to do the different things he or she values doing).

It is difficult to address in detail the many issues Sen raises about matters of justice and freedom in the space permitted here. But Sen’s emphasis on capabilities and freedoms highlights one thing about which progressives, especially of the social democratic stripe, should be more serious: ensuring that discussions of quality of life and wellbeing are grounded in an ethical understanding of freedom and opportunity.

Figure 5. Some competing views of social justice

	Location of justice	Guiding value	Outcomes
Resource-based view (Rawls)	Emphasis on institutions	Fairness	Just distribution of “primary resources”
Capabilities-based view (Sen)	Emphasis on individuals	Fairness	Exercises of “actual opportunities” of living well

Conclusion

Quality of life has proven to be a powerful current in contemporary Australian society. The concept appeals not just to our desire for prosperity but also sustainability and community. Public policy that is deeply impoverished when policy makers fail to consider the requirements for living well.

Despite evident concerns about our quality of life, Australians live in a society that, based on all relevant measures, has little reason to feel a sense of crisis. This anomaly in the national mood reflects two things: (1) aspirational anxiety about the maintenance of prosperity; and (2) a cultural understanding of a good quality of life, which emphasises a certain sunkissed, suburban Australian lifestyle.

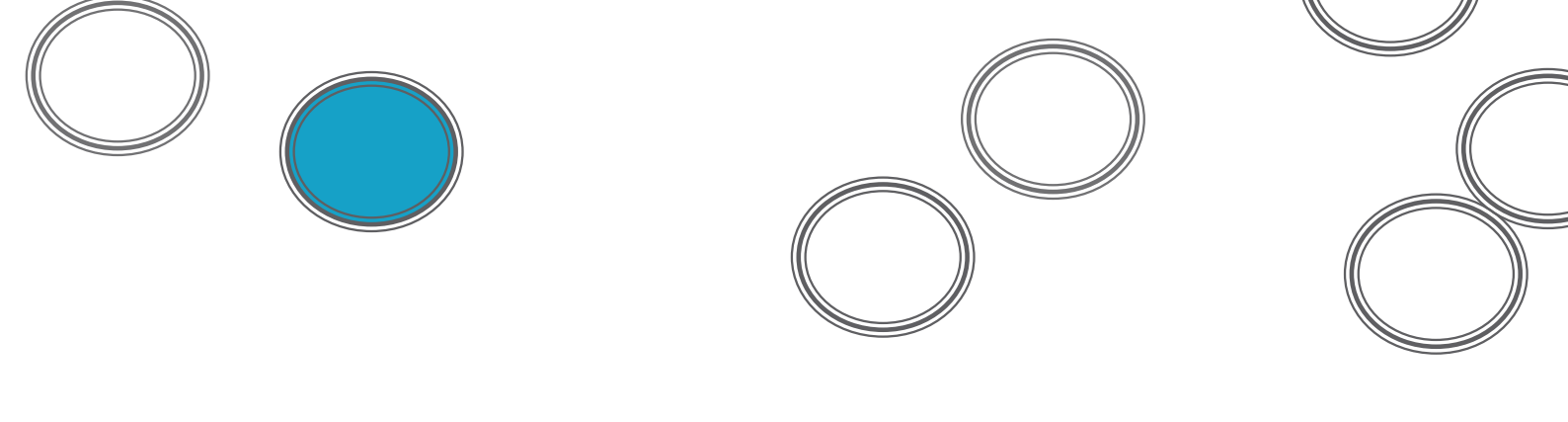
It is important to understand quality of life as something related to a broader conception of wellbeing. Rather than an end in and of itself, quality of life represents some of the social conditions that are required for individual flourishing. We may use them synonymously, but happiness, quality of life and wellbeing represent distinct things.

There is a need for progressives to offer a more confident ethical stance on such matters, for it is impossible to discuss the idea of living well in a philosophical vacuum. Any such discussions will unavoidably draw upon conceptions of a good society. The tradition of social democracy remains the best means of understanding the relationship between quality of life, wellbeing and freedom.



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