

Governments play a key role in our happiness, but how do we get them to care?



The Global Happiness Council, which I am honoured to direct on behalf of the United Arab Emirates, has just issued the first [Global Happiness Policy Report](#) (GHPR) as a companion volume to the annual [World Happiness Report](#) (co-edited by John Helliwell, Richard Layard, and me). The purpose of the GHPR is to help governments to promote happiness by showcasing best practices from around the world. In addition to the GHPR, the UAE hosts an annual Global Happiness Dialogue, that brings together senior government officials, policy experts, scientists, and community leaders from all over the world in an intensive brainstorming.

Of course a preliminary question is how to foster governments that are interested in promoting the happiness of their people.

Assuming that governments are truly interested in the wellbeing of the public, there are many kinds of policies that should advance. The first is honesty. Corruption directly undermines wellbeing, as [Helliwell \(2017\)](#) has shown persuasively in his statistical studies. Nobody likes to live in a country where the government is widely believed to cheat as a matter of course. Yet beyond honesty, there are other policies that can also make a huge difference.

In the [GHPR](#), Layard persuasively identifies the public's access to mental health services as a key intervention that may be more important than almost any other. Mental illness is pervasive and is a major source of suffering in the world today. An estimated 10 per cent or so of the population is subject to major depressive disorder (depression). Depression is a major killer andcrippler, and yet it can be treated. Most governments fail to recognise the burden of depression in terms of suffering, absenteeism, healthcare costs, disability, and other heavy costs.

Governments can also help to ensure that schools promote happiness of young people, and teach them life skills to promote a lifetime of happiness. Workplaces can be places of creativity and sociality rather than drudgery and exploitation. And cities can build communities and social inclusion with public parks, walking zones, public transport, and other amenities, or segregate populations by class, race, and ethnicity, through zoning, the privatisation of public services, air and water pollution in the poorer neighbourhoods, and other harms imposed on part of the population, usually the poorest and most marginalised.

Still, the biggest challenge is getting governments to care in the first place. This challenge of course harks back to the birth of Western political science itself, ever since Aristotle wrote *The Politics* to identify the constitutions among the Greek city-states that most effectively promoted *eudaimonia* (flourishing) of the polis. Ever since Aristotle, political philosophers and more recently political scientists have taken one of two paths. One, a la Aristotle, assumes that governments aim to promote the wellbeing of their citizens. The other, a la Machiavelli, Marx, and today's public choice theorists, assumes that governments aim to enrich themselves, or the upper class, or some ethnic group, or to conquer others in the pursuit of wealth, security, and glory, or simply to maintain power.

So which is it? Either, of course, can be correct. The policy challenge is to get more governments of the first rather than second kind.

In mainstream Anglo-American thinking, the key to good government is constitutional rule underpinned by elections with universal suffrage. That faith in elections and constitutionalism (either written as in the US or by tradition as in the UK) is certainly not all wrong, but it's also far from being a complete answer.

One reason is that both Britain and the U.S. themselves have had two contrasting faces of government. To their own citizens they have generally been constitutional, at least during the past century. Yet to the rest of the world, they've often been the opposite. The British Empire in its heyday spread war, conquest and domination, not democracy, while today the US also spreads war rather than peace, tranquility, and happiness.

Another evident failure occurs when democracy succumbs to corruption, capture by the rich, racism, nativism, and other forms of chauvinism. The majority can all too easily crush or suppress the minority in the name of majority rule. The U.S. is a democracy in formal terms, yet the government in Washington hardly represents the poor or protects ethnic minorities from racism and violence.

The balance between good government and bad government always hangs in the balance, in every place and every generation. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's magnificent medieval frescoes (1338-9) of the [Allegory of Good and Bad Government](#), in the council hall of Sienna, depict the alternative outcomes. One fresco celebrates prosperity brought by good government; the other, decrepitude occasioned by bad government. And clearly it's the same countryside in both frescoes, just living under different political realities.

What's more, the outcomes in one country are contagious to others.

Good government in one country favours good government elsewhere, through imitation, admiration, and diffusion of best practices. Bad government also spreads across international borders, through wars, corruption, and fear. Currently, we are suffering a wave of bad practices, as a surge of nasty nativism and racism sweeps through the U.S. and Europe, stirring fears that propagate the nastiness further. Nobody would accuse Donald Trump of spreading happiness, neither within the U.S. nor internationally.

The contributors to the Global Happiness Policy Report and the World Happiness Report are not naïve. We know that the struggle for happiness involves more than merely tweaking a few policies here and there. But we believe, like Aristotle (not to mention Confucius, Buddha, Jefferson, Bentham, and others) that happiness is worth striving for, and that reason, practice, compassion, and emulation can create a wave of wellbeing and decency of governance in our time. Nothing is assured, but it's a struggle worth waging. And no doubt, each generation will have to renew the commitment and relive that struggle under ever-changing conditions.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the [Global Happiness Policy Report](#), co-edited by Jeffrey Sachs, Richard Layard (LSE's Centre for Economic Performance, [CEP](#)) and John Helliwell (University of British Columbia, and NBER).
- The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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