

**JANUARY 2011**

---

**HAPPINESS**

---

**ABIGAIL  
ROSS-JACKSON**



**DEBATING MATTERS  
TOPIC  
GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

**MOTION:**

**“HAPPINESS IS  
THE BUSINESS OF  
GOVERNMENT”**

# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The happiness debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Backgrounders**

**Organisations**

**In the news**

## KEY TERMS

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

Gross National Happiness (GNH)

# INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

# NOTES

1  
1  
2  
4  
5  
5  
6

John Stuart Mill famously said: ‘Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so’, but from April 2011 the Office for National Statistics will start to ask people to do just that - report their happiness. The decision relates to increasing debate about whether governments should concern themselves with our happiness and criticism of too narrow a focus on measures of economic output, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as a measure of the government’s success. In 2005, Lord Layard argued that ‘Happiness should become the goal of policy, and the progress of national happiness should be measured.’ [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. Layard and others cite the ‘Easterlin Paradox’ – the argument, advanced by Richard Easterlin in the 1970s, that while we may have got richer year by year, we haven’t got any happier – in support of their stance that governments need to develop policy goals more orientated towards the achievement of happiness. Whilst some have challenged Easterlin’s original findings [Ref: [Center for Global Development](#)], the focus on happiness has gained momentum in recent years [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. French President Nicolas Sarkozy endorsed the importance of happiness and wellbeing to governments in 2009 [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], and most recently Prime Minister David Cameron has announced that the coalition government will be addressing happiness and wellbeing as part of its economic policy [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. While few would deny the desirability of happiness, it doesn’t necessarily follow that its promotion should be the concern of government. This raises two related questions: First, can the government promote happiness? Indeed, can happiness even be measured? And, second, should the government set itself this goal, or should individuals be responsible for their own happiness?



### What's the relationship between prosperity and happiness?

Few would disagree with the old adage that 'money can't buy you happiness' though most would regard achieving a degree of material wealth as an important human aspiration. However, Richard Layard, one of the leading advocates of the need to re-focus the priorities of government around happiness, argues that once a certain level of wealth is achieved – around £10,000 per person – happiness becomes 'inversely related to income' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. For Layard progress cannot be measured by growth in GDP, but instead by measuring the 'overall scale of human happiness and misery'. He therefore welcomed Sarkozy's 'Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress' which reported in September 2009 [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. This commission, chaired by Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz and supported by fellow Laureate Amartya Sen, argued that 'those attempting to guide the economy and our societies are like pilots trying to steer a course without a reliable compass' and advocated a 'dashboard' of metrics covering health, education, environment, employment, material well-being, interpersonal connectedness, political engagement and equity [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Others dispute the finding that, beyond a certain amount, wealth does not make us happier [Ref: [Economist](#)] and argue that the move to measure happiness is, in reality, an attack on the importance of economic growth [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Indur Goklany has argued that unprecedented economic growth over the past century has played a decisive role in increasing life expectancy, improving education and enhancing economic and social freedoms [Ref: [Reason](#)]; thereby providing us with the means to enrich our lives and pursue the

goals we wish to.

### Happiness: can it be measured and is it the concern of government anyway?

Philosophers down the ages have debated what exactly constitutes 'the good life', and the pursuit of happiness is seen by many as being a noble aim. What this means in practice is rather more difficult to pin down. Though the UK's Office for National Statistics has launched a national debate on what would constitute credible measures of well-being, and intends to include questions to solicit information about people's views of their own well-being in household surveys [Ref: [Office for National Statistics](#)], some claim that attempting to measure happiness is at best a waste of time and at worst absurd. Indeed, such critics associate this approach to happiness as sharing a fundamental misunderstanding with the growing 'happiness industry' and literature on the 'science of happiness'. This misunderstanding treats happiness as more akin to a transient state of enjoyment, which is measurable by surveys and brain scans, rather than having a broader conceptualisation which involves the 'orientation of your life towards meaning, purpose and value' [Ref: [THES](#)]. From this perspective, happiness is a by-product of having meaningful goals and attachments in one's life, and is shaped by purposefully navigating the challenges that confront you. Others disagree, arguing that neuroscientists say happiness is tangible and the result of brain activity; so you can see and measure it [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. In which case, wouldn't it be useful for governments to measure how happy people are?

### Shaping better policy or colonising our minds?

The coalition government has not yet laid out specific proposals on how measuring happiness will influence policy objectives, but Cameron has made clear the importance he attaches to ‘all those things that make life worthwhile’, not just the bottom line [Ref: [YouGov](#)]. Previously, the New Labour government’s interest in the happiness agenda influenced policy discussions on such wide ranging issues as school lessons on emotional intelligence; parenting classes; support for volunteering and work-life balance; a ban on commercial advertising to children; and more money to tackle mental illness [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Supporters of the previous government have expressed cynicism about whether David Cameron has a genuine interest in focusing on people’s happiness and have argued that, if he does, he needs to demonstrate it by paying far greater attention to such issues as growing economic inequalities which generate misery [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Others question what focussing on happiness as a basis for policy-making reveals about government, pointing out that happiness policy has in the past been endorsed by a number of dictators and failing regimes; from Stalin to Kim Il Sung, and fictionally portrayed in dystopian terms in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. One critic of the happiness agenda argues that it is ‘motivated by a powerful mood of atomisation and disenchantment with public life’ where ‘the individual self has become the central focus of social, moral and cultural life’ [Ref: [spiked](#)]. From this perspective many politicians, who increasingly struggle to give meaning to public life, become attracted to the more Orwellian task of managing our internal lives. As another critic puts it: ‘deciding what people want can rapidly develop into deciding what they should want’ [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)].



## ESSENTIAL READING

Can you measure the nation's wellbeing? The ONS says yes  
Mark King *Guardian* 26 December 2010

How can we measure happiness?  
Philip Johnston *Telegraph* 16 November 2010

This house believes that GDP growth is a poor measure of improving living standards  
Head to head: Andrew Oswald and Steve Landefeld *Economist*  
April 2010

## FOR

Leading article: An index of happiness is at least a worthwhile endeavour  
*Independent* 26 November 2010

Political success may not just be about the economy, stupid, but about happiness  
Hamish McRae *Independent* 26 November 2010

An unhappiness index is more David Cameron's style  
Polly Toynbee *Guardian* 16 November 2010

Happiness is ... becoming a bit more scientific  
Barbara Gunnell *Guardian* 15 November 2010

This is the greatest good Richard Layard  
*Guardian* 13 September 2009

4 of 6

NOTES

## AGAINST

Happiness is (about to be) overrated  
Rob Killick *UK After the Recession* 11 January 2011

Call me a grump, but this happiness index is just a cynical attempt to control our minds  
Melanie Phillips *Daily Mail* 30 November 2010

Happy-clappy Cameron in perfect tune with Stalin  
Brendan O'Neill *First Post* 26 November 2010

Measuring our happiness is anti-growth  
Andrew Haldenby *Telegraph* 15 November 2010

Are you going to make a dream come true?  
Richard Schoch *Times Higher Educational Supplement* 31 March 2006

## IN DEPTH

The Official Pursuit of Happiness  
Derek Bok *Project Syndicate* 4 January 2011

Happiness: A measure of cheer  
Tim Harford *Financial Times* 27 December 2010

State of joy: Why your country needs you to be happy  
Julian Baggini *Independent* 6 January 2010

Will this man make you happy?  
Stuart Jeffries *Guardian* 24 June 2008

Why the 'politics of happiness' makes me mad  
Frank Furedi *spiked* 23 May 2006



# BACKGROUNDERS

5 of 6

NOTES

Global Prosperity Wonkcast

*Center for Global Development* January 2011

The joyless or the jobless: Should governments pursue happiness rather than economic growth?

*Economist* 25 November 2010

The role of local government in promoting wellbeing

Commissioned by Local Government Improvement and Development and the National Mental Health Development Unit  
*New Economics Foundation* November 2010

The Rise and Fall of the G.D.P.

Jon Gertner *New York Times* 13 May 2010

The State of Happiness

*The Young Foundation* January 2010

Even if You Can't Buy It, Happiness Is Big Business

*New York Times* 26 November 2008

The happiness formula

*BBC News* 4 July 2008

Myles Burnyeat on Aristotle on Happiness

*Philosophy Bites* 18 November 2007

Now for the Good News

Indur M. Goklany *Reason* 23 March 2007

The battle for affluence

*Battle of Ideas* 28 October 2006

## ORGANISATIONS

Canadian Index of Wellbeing

Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress

ESRC Social Science for Schools: Happiness

Gallup

Gross National Happiness USA

Gross National Happiness: The centre for Bhutan studies

LSE Centre for Public Performance

New Economics Foundation

Office for National Statistics



## IN THE NEWS

Happiness is having a job, and the salary doesn't matter  
*Telegraph* 10 January 2011

Archbishop of Wales' concern over happiness index  
*BBC News* 25 December 2010

Happiness doesn't increase with growing wealth of nations, finds study  
*Guardian* 13 December 2010

Money really doesn't buy happiness - in the long term at least  
*Telegraph* 13 December 2010

Are you happy?  
*Argus* 25 November 2010

David Cameron: I want to make people feel better  
*Telegraph* 25 November 2010

Plan to measure happiness 'not woolly' – Cameron  
*BBC News* 25 November 2010

Government 'planning to measure people's happiness'  
*BBC News* 15 November 2010

Government to monitor nation's happiness  
*Telegraph* 15 November 2010

David Cameron aims to make happiness the new GDP  
*Guardian* 14 November 2010

Nicolas Sarkozy wants to measure economic success in 'happiness'  
*Telegraph* 14 September 2009

'Happiness' lessons to be given to schoolchildren  
*Telegraph* 7 September 2008

Denmark 'world's happiest nation'  
*BBC News* 3 July 2008

Britons 'are getting unhappier'  
*BBC News* 17 April 2007

Therapy could 'cut benefits bill'  
*BBC News* 19 June 2006

Tories promise to make happiness a priority  
*Guardian* 23 May 2006

Happiness is no laughing matter  
*Scotsman* 16 February 2005

Why money doesn't buy happiness  
*BBC News* 27 January 2005

Happiness is the new Economics  
*The Times* 5 December 2004

The politics of happiness  
*BBC News* 20 January 2003

6 of 6

NOTES



## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

## FIND OUT MORE

Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

Debating Matters Competition  
Academy of Ideas Ltd  
Signet House  
49-51 Farringdon Road  
London  
EC1M 3JP

- Yes, I'd like to know more. Please send me further information about the Debating Matters Competition:
- I am a teacher and would like further details about events in my area and how to enter a team
- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

First name

Surname

School/company/  
organisation

Professional role  
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone

**“TEENAGE CITIZENS  
THINKING DEEPLY  
ABOUT...SOCIAL  
ISSUES”**

**IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA**

