



SOPHIA THINK TANK

-an initiative of Bible Society Australia-

QUO VADIS AUSTRALIA?

Synopsis

Australia's social environment is broken and in need of repair. This is affecting Australia's wellbeing, especially for children and youth. It is the responsibility of the whole community to identify the problems and to commit to do something about the process of repair.

Society can be viewed from the perspective of various drivers that influence values, priorities, and behaviours within that society, thus forming a culture by which that society is known. If the social environment is broken it will help to ask how each of the drivers have helped to create that brokenness and how each of them can be involved in working toward its repair.

In 2012 Sophia Think Tank is taking on the challenge of asking those questions and challenging all of us to take action that will begin to address the problems and to repair the social environment. This paper is an introduction to the process. You are invited to read and then become a part of that process with us....

The State of Australia's Social Environment

When I was in my twenty something's there was a youth movement in Australia that gathered under the title 'Quo Vadis Australia?' Roughly translated it asks the question 'where are you headed Australia?' A good question in the 1970's and perhaps an even better one now.

Australia is often known as 'the lucky country' and indeed we are in many ways. Our capital cities continually rank among the most liveable cities in the world and we seem to have survived the recent difficult economic times better than most. Indicators of wellbeing such as life expectancy at birth, high educational outcomes, and self-reports of happiness put us right up there amongst the top countries in the world.

Until recently, social progress was measured by economic growth, stability, and opportunity. Such economic factors are important for the social wellbeing of a country and Australia fares well on those indices. But a Country's wellbeing is a lot more complex than that. In commenting on the Gross Domestic Product as a measure of wellbeing Ross Gittins

states: "the problem is we have fallen into the habit of regarding GDP as something much more: the nation's bottom line, a measure of the progress our society is making, the supreme indicator of our wellbeing.

"GDP was never intended to fill that role and, as every economist will concede, it is quite inadequate to the task. The very features that make it a good guide to the economy's job-creating potential make it unsuited to measuring our wider wellbeing."¹

Gittins notes that there are many other mechanisms for measuring social progress including the OECD's 'Better Life Index'², the ABS's 'Measuring Australia's Progress'³, and the Canadian Index of wellbeing.⁴ Gittins is writing here in introduction to the Fairfax attempt to present another measure of Australian social wellbeing, the Fairfax/Lateral Economics research known as the National Wellbeing Index.⁵

There is a certain amount of angst in some sectors of Australian Society that the social environment is broken and in need of repair. The National Wellbeing Index tells us that while the Australian social situation is in good health according to some factors (self-reports of happiness; net national income; and human capital, including education) there is cause for concern when measured by other factors. A sense of wellbeing has been assisted by improvements in education and a rise in net national income, but it has been attacked by a steady decline in health (especially obesity and mental health problems), inequality, and job satisfaction.

Obesity has been found to have a major impact on one's sense of wellbeing. Dr Boyd Swinburn of Deakin University in Melbourne stated that research has found obesity has an effect on the quality of life similar to a major physical disability such as blindness or deafness. "Quality of life includes mental and physical health, social wellbeing and personal self-esteem. Obesity affects all of those," he said.⁶ It is estimated that obesity affects almost 25% of the population and is a huge drain on the Nation's wellbeing.

Mental health problems continue to be on the rise in Australia. It is estimated that around 20% of our population are affected by mental illness at any given time and that mental illness has effected over 45% of the population at some time.⁷ It becomes even more disturbing when it is recognized that mental illness is grossly under-reported and undiagnosed.

The Inequality index reminds us of the growing gulf between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in our Society. It is said that Australia is at risk of splitting into two Australias that occupy

¹<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/theres-so-much-more-to-wealth-than-money-20111207-1ojbx.html#ixzz1jgdQmzwN>

² <http://oecdbetterlifeindex.org/>

³ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1370.0>

⁴ <http://ciw.ca/en/>

⁵ <http://www.theage.com.au/national/wellbeing>

⁶ <http://www.theage.com.au/national/happy-to-live-longer-but-mental-illness-and-obesity-still-need-to-be-dealt-with-20111208-1olgc.html>

⁷ [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/mentalhealth/Publishing.nsf/Content/C5DCE1B680AF5ACACA2577B5007B77B7/\\$File/mh%20stats%20facts.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/mentalhealth/Publishing.nsf/Content/C5DCE1B680AF5ACACA2577B5007B77B7/$File/mh%20stats%20facts.pdf)

different realms and rarely come into contact with each other.⁸ While income is important in the measure of a Nation's wellbeing, the distribution of that income also matters and makes a big difference in the wellbeing stakes. Australia is doing well on the income side but not so well on the distribution of that income.

In commenting on the 'Wellbeing Index' overall, its primary author, Nick Gruen, asks the question "Does the sum of these maneuvers solve the age-old dilemma of measuring our wellbeing?" He answers his own question, 'Far from it. Having sought the wisdom of Solomon, what wisdom we've gained has been that of Socrates. We know only too well how little we know.'⁹

Further, in an Editorial comment on the Index¹⁰ it is said:

You, readers, have been telling us for years that money is not all that matters to you. Money does matter, as any person who lacks it can tell. Indeed, making money is one of the best ways to improve quality of life, at least up to a point.

But other things matter, too. If we achieve economic success only by severely depleting the natural environment we leave for our children, it's unclear whether society is truly any better off. If we work so hard we fail to look after our mental and physical health, surely we have reduced our wellbeing. If income gains go mainly to the already rich, and not the poor, society as a whole is unlikely improved. And if we fail to invest in the education of our children and the skills of our workforce, surely our economic success will be fleeting.

All these things matter, but rarely do they receive the regular and avid attention that quarterly releases of the national accounts of gross domestic product do. We hope to change that, and think it ought to be possible to measure what matters. It is this fundamental belief that has prompted the *Herald* to commission an index of national wellbeing that will go beyond GDP as a measure of social progress.

Let us be the first to admit, our index isn't perfect. Constructing a single index to track something as subjective as wellbeing was never going to be an easy task. But we challenge anyone - any private sector economists or government agencies - to do better and to commit to producing it on a regular basis. We will happily retire our index if they do. Until then, we will keep reporting the results of our wellbeing index every quarter, shortly after GDP figures are released. When the alternative is silence on these important issues, we choose well-intentioned, if imperfect, action over inaction.

In this ever spinning world of politics and media, producing this index allows us to root ourselves in something deeper than just the latest GDP or jobs figures. We'll keep reporting those, too, as they are important indicators of economic success and inputs into economic policymaking. But politicians must be called to account for Australia's performance across a range of measures of success.

We look forward to introducing you to the index in coming days and receiving your feedback. If we fall short in our attempts to measure what matters, that is one thing. If we fail to even ask what matters, that is to fail entirely.

⁸ <http://www.theage.com.au/national/putting-a-figure-on-inequality-adds-to-strength-of-statistical-spotlight-20111208-1olgo.html>

⁹ <http://www.theage.com.au/business/putting-a-figure-on-social-progress-20111207-1ojbt.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/editorial/measuring-what-counts-20111207-1oj5e.html>

So, according to the Wellbeing Index, along with other measures, Australia is doing pretty well, especially when compared with many, if not most, other countries. But there are causes for concern, indicators that all is not well and that the 'wellbeing' is a façade that is not very deep in places. It doesn't take too much digging and the underlying social problems appear and at times for some people appear overwhelming. I am being purposefully non-alarmist in my recording of this for those who are alarmist merely stir up the emotions of the already converted and do nothing to change the impressions of skeptics. But, it is possible that our society is headed for trouble. There are many who tell us that we are sick, our social environment is broken, and that there is a call for all of us to be involved in its repair. This is especially so when it comes to the social environment for our children and young people.

Richard Eckersley, Founding Director of Australia21 Ltd¹¹, has written and spoken a great deal about this problem. In a talk at the ACL 2011 National Conference in Canberra he told the story of how, after a trip away overseas, upon return he was able to see Australia through different eyes. He saw a culture that was exploitative and oppressive, harsh and oppressed, and suffering from spiritual poverty.¹² He went on to say that wellbeing is much more than a number of boxes that can be ticked. He said that human wellbeing was to be found across four different spectrums. The Material (food, water, air, clothing, shelter), Social (family, friends, Community), Cultural (reasons to live), and Spiritual (defined by him as connectedness to the world). He said that the things that matter most are at risk to the things that matter least. One example of that was the change in motivation to undertake higher education. Whereas in the 1970's the primary motivation was reportedly to develop a meaningful philosophy of life, today it is to become financially well off.

Eckersley's thesis is that the official story given to us regarding youth and wellbeing needs to be challenged. The Government and certain sections of the Media tell us that our young people are the healthiest generation ever and back this up with measurements of dropping mortality rates and of self-reports of happiness by young people. The new story is not as rosy. Amongst our children and youth, mental health problems are on the rise, child and youth obesity is increasing, and alongside self-reports of happiness are self-reports of being overwhelmed, exhausted, depressed, anxious, and angry. He concludes that our young people may be 'feeling happy' but that they are not experiencing wellbeing.

What's causing this? Eckersley states that there are a multiplicity of factors associated with family issues, mass and social media, education and work, and religion¹³. He states that materialism and individualism are risk factors in our society that need to be closely watched.

¹¹ <http://www.australia21.org.au/>

¹² The summary of Eckersley's talk is taken from notes that were recorded by the author of this paper.

¹³ Eckersley notes that religion and social indicators of wellbeing are not positively correlated when measuring various societies. He points to the USA an example of a country with high religiosity and low wellbeing measures and to various European countries with low religiosity scores and higher wellbeing measures. In later contact with him I asked him to elaborate and he pointed me to his website <http://www.richardeckersley.com.au> and in particular his book *Well and Good*. The first part of the prologue and the chapter on postmodern science, faith and morality are especially interesting in this light. He also sent me a link to a broadcast on religion and science and his views on the relationship between the two (Eckersley, R. Science and religion *Ockham's Razor*, ABC Radio National, 23 December 2007 (<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/ockhamsrazor/stories/2007/2120492.htm#transcript>)).

A scan of the various websites that carry Eckersley's work¹⁴ delivers numerous articles, chapters, books, and talks on the wellbeing of Australia's children and youth and the need for concerned effort. I recommend such a scan.

Barbara Biggins, the Honorary CEO of Australian Council on Children and the Media, has asked the question through 'On Line Opinion', "Has Australia been good to its kids?"¹⁵ In it she quotes from Richard Eckersley, speaking at the second Australian Conference on Children and the Media: "The orthodox view is that young people have never been healthier; mortality rates continue to fall, and most report that they are healthy, happy and satisfied with their lives. This perspective tends to run counter to claims of media harm. However, a wider analysis of data on young people's health suggests it is declining, especially through increased rates of mental illness and obesity. The media are implicated in these trends in multiple and complex ways"

Biggins suggests that children are adversely affected by messages through all types of media that impacts their health and wellbeing along with their developing sense of self, and their understanding of where happiness really lies. These messages convey the need for consumerism and have been termed a corporate takeover of childhood. Such messages are often linked to the sexualisation of children and the idea that to be happy I need to have more.

Biggins quotes from Sharon Beder¹⁶

...the consequence of the corporate capture of childhood is not only being felt by children who are becoming more materialistic, overweight, stressed, depressed and self-destructive. Advertising and marketing aims to make these future citizens dissatisfied with what they have and to want to consume more. Yet the health of the planet requires that we consume less.

She then concludes her article by asking 'is Australia being good to its kids by continuing to allow advertisers and marketers fairly free access to them, and turning a blind eye to the consequences? That's a question that shouldn't be ignored.

There are many other social researchers writing in this area and agreeing that all is not well for Australia's children and youth as we venture further into the 21st Century. Michael Carr-Gregg¹⁷ challenges the Educational system in a lot of his writing as well as expressing concern about media emphases; Hugh Mackay¹⁸ writes extensively about Australian values and standards and warns that many of the changing social trends in our country will be detrimental for the development of young people's sense of wellbeing, a problem that will

See also Eckersley, R. 2008. Science, religion and spirituality. *New Renaissance Online*, <http://www.ru.org/spirituality/science-religion-and-spirituality.html>.

¹⁴ <http://www.metafuture.org/articlesbycolleagues.htm>, <http://www.richardeckersley.com.au>, and <http://www.australia21.org.au>

¹⁵ <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=13057>

¹⁶ 'This Little Kiddy Went to Market: the corporate capture of childhood' (London, Pluto Press, 2009)

¹⁷ <http://www.michaelcarr-gregg.com.au/>

¹⁸ <http://www.hughmackay.com.au/>

last into adulthood and beyond. Steve Biddulph¹⁹ speaks and writes on the need to make school much more 'boy friendly' and challenges the educational system to be proactive in bringing about positive change.

So, in asking the question 'Qou Vadis Australia?' we see that in many ways we are in trouble, especially when it comes to the social environment for children and youth and the ways that our young people are trying to cope with that. Indicators of the social problem include drug abuse, obesity, mental health problems, physical and verbal abuse in bullying, street violence, and in the home, along with a growing sense of social isolation amongst our youth. Blame has been thrown at the Educational system, the Media, and Government policies and lack of funding, to name a few.

Working to Repair the Brokenness

However, the approach to doing something about it needs to be a Community Development one. It does us no good in the long term to be scapegoating for in the end it simply passes the blame around and causes everyone to be sidestepping and looking for the next 'big answer'. A Community Development approach asks the question 'What can I do about this?' 'What can my organization do to address this problem?' And, 'How can we all work together to create a better society and nurture wellbeing?'

When I was a Councillor with the City of Melbourne we started to introduce policies that would lead to Melbourne being accredited as a UNICEF Child Friendly City.²⁰ That work continues, not only in Melbourne but in many cities across Australia. It is an excellent challenge and works on the principle that if a city is a child friendly city is a city that is friendly for all. The only way to achieve a child friendly status is for everyone, all the City's stakeholders, to work together and to bring all their strengths to the table to overcome the factors that are working against child friendliness and to put into place those factors that will deliver child friendliness. The same is to be said of any initiatives that are designed to work toward social wellbeing. If our social environment is healthy for children and young people it will be healthy for all and it will be of advantage for the future. And, it is the responsibility of all of us.

Catherine Fitts has created what she calls 'The Popsicle Index'²¹ (Icy Pole index for us Australians!) as the percentage of people in a community who believe it is safe for a child to go from home to the nearest store, buy a popsicle, and return home safely. She points out that the Index used to be 100%. It is much lower than that now. Is it too much to hope for our Australian cities to return to an Icy Pole index that nears 100%? It will take all of us to see it achieved.

Sophia Think Tank and Project 217

¹⁹ http://web.me.com/stevebiddulph/Site_1/Home.html

²⁰ <http://www.childfriendlycities.org/>

²¹ http://solari.com/articles/popsicle_index/

All of us? Where do we begin? Sophia Think Tank²² identifies ten drivers in Australian society that are highly influential in the development of that society. These Drivers are

- Media
- Arts
- Business
- Sports
- Community Services
- Health
- Justice
- Law
- Education
- Politics

If we are going to experience sustainable change in our social environment, if the social environment is indeed going to be repaired, all of these Drivers will have a role to play. It is also true that each one of these Drivers have had a role in the decline of the social environment. During the year of 2012 Sophia Think Tank will be conducting Roundtables with representatives of each of these Drivers to identify and discuss the ways that the Driver has added to the brokenness and what each Driver can do to help begin to repair the brokenness. And then, what are we going to do about that?

Throughout the year we will be delivering 'Project Reports' in public meetings and ongoing progress can be found on the Sophia Think Tank website.²³ Anyone and everyone will be invited to contribute to the discussion along the way.

We are calling this Project 217. In a Bible²⁴ Book by the name of Nehemiah there is a verse (2:17) that talks of the necessity of rebuilding the walls of the City. Nehemiah, a great urban planner, strategist, and reformer, saw that the city walls needed to be repaired if they were

²² Sophia Think Tank is Bible Society Australia's national think tank on values, priorities, and behaviour in Australian Society

²³ www.st2.com.au

²⁴ The Bible is an ancient source of relevant wisdom and it has much to say about the brokenness and repair of the social environment. The Bible has been grossly misused across the history of western civilization and such abuses are well documented and commented upon frequently, both in a reasoned manner and in a manner much less to be desired. However, the positive effect that the Bible has had upon our culture across the years has been too easily forgotten and goes unacknowledged.

It reminds me of the Monty Python scene in the Movie 'Life of Brian' where the Liberation Front is meeting and they call out 'what have the Romans ever done for us!?' The expected answer is 'nothing at all' but instead one of the gathered remembers the aqueducts then another mentions the roads and another the sanitation and so it goes on until there's quite a healthy list of good things the Romans have done for them. So it often goes when reflecting on 'What has the Bible ever done for us!?' The expected answer is 'a whole lot of really bad things....' I would hope that it might be remembered the role the Bible has had in the development of our Society (Education, Politics, Arts, Law, Justice, and so on) and that on this basis the Bible be given a chance to once again speak into the brokenness and repair of our social environment. There are many other voices that will be helpfully listened to and I would hope that the Bible will be added to the list of sources of wisdom for the day.

to once again take pride in their city. The walls of our cities, the social environment, are in need of repair so we can be proud of the legacy we are passing onto the next generation.

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