

Book Review

Derek Bok *The Politics of Happiness. What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-being*. 2010, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford.

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Everyone wants to be happy. Jeremy Bentham even argued that this should be the very goal of government. Research on happiness may tell us what makes us happy, but is it possible for governments to govern in such a way as to maximise happiness? This is the task that Derek Bok sets himself. Drawing upon happiness research, which can include life satisfaction, well-being, quality of life etc., the author seeks lessons for government in an accessible and concise way.

After summarizing happiness research, he draws important conclusions. First, increasing income through general growth and prosperity does not necessarily lead to increasing happiness in the longer term. Although richer people are happier than poorer people, the percentage of Americans who declare themselves to be happy has not changed since 50 years ago during a period when national incomes have increased substantially, the so-called “Easterlin paradox”. Secondly, people are not the best judge of what will make them happy. They attach too much importance to material possessions and money rather than social relationships and health. Thirdly rising levels of inequality do not seem to make people less happy and fourthly raising welfare spending does not lead to increasing happiness.

The policy implications Bok draws are that we should start to question the model of economic growth, which threatens to destroy the planet but is not necessarily making its residents any happier. Some of his more concrete solutions address larger collective problems of responsibility, for example, by ensuring that governance works and gains people’s trust, that governance provides financial security by avoiding recessions and unemployment and redundancies and provides better and universal health care, a goal largely achieved in Europe.

Other solutions are addressed to the individual – for example encouraging personal responsibility to avoid debt, pre-marital counselling to encourage stable emotional relationships, developing policies to address common disorders such as chronic pain, sleep disorders and depression that can cause a great deal of individual misery.

As an ex-President of Harvard University, Derek Bok is particularly concerned that education should be used to increase general happiness. He argues that this can be done by encouraging people to take a broader range of courses to improve their lives and not just focus on narrow vocational specialisms. And of course there should be more education because it also makes us happy.

These policies and solutions are addressed to an American audience and reflect a certain American concern with individual self-improvement and responsibility. In Europe the ‘quality of life’ is an explicit goal of policy and tends to be directed to collective policies such as improving working conditions,

living conditions, work-life balance and work activation policies. It is therefore good to know that at least some European countries generally score better than the US in the happiness league tables. However, addressing the individual problems (such as depression, sleep disorders and chronic pain, personal debt etc.) that Bok considers tends to be ignored in the agenda of European social policy. All are things that require a relatively low monetary investment and have known solutions. Some might argue that they are not the business of government, but if the goal of government were to be, as Jeremy Bentham argued, the greatest happiness of the greatest number it would require some redirection. Hence, this view from across the Atlantic provides food for thought.

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