

We need a Ministry of Happiness

The ACT is on the right track by introducing a wellbeing index, but is it enough to tackle societal problems?

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AUSTRALIA is facing an epidemic of loneliness, depression and suicide. These problems aren't being solved by usual medicines or policies. What if federal, state and territory governments established a Ministry of Happiness to investigate the causes and find rational, achievable and funded solutions that looked beyond the typical remedies for modern malaise?

The statistics don't lie. One in three young Australians between the ages of 18 and 25 are routinely lonely, according to a recent report by VicHealth and Swinburne University. One in five Australians rarely or ever have anybody to speak to in their daily lives. Rates of suicide are high, though Lithuania has the worst rate in the world, and Australia is above the World Health Organisation's global average. Depression and anxiety are sky-rocketing. Three million Australian use anti-depressant drugs, including 100,000 children, according to recent figures released by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

The ACT government should be applauded for starting the country's first wellbeing index, to be formally launched next year, to determine priority for funding. Based around a similar idea in New Zealand, the index will examine various strands of wellbeing related to the environment, health, housing and cultural identity. In a recent government survey of 1200 Canberra citizens, what determined a positive outlook for people were good relationships with family, friends and others and a healthy work-life balance.

Unfortunately, the ACT appears unlikely to establish a ministerial portfolio for wellbeing, loneliness or happiness, throwing into question its seriousness and ability to tackle the problems it's measuring. Nonetheless, the ACT's recent decision to legalise personal use of cannabis and consider decriminalising MDMA or ecstasy in the future is a welcome move towards treating adult citizens with respect.

Some nations around the world already have Ministries of Happiness including the United Arab Emirates and states in India and Nigeria. Bhutan began this worldwide movement in 2008 by aiming to measure Gross National Happiness (GNH). Its success in recent years has been mixed though the intentions were largely good. Anthropologist Dorji Penjore has extensively researched the GNH and says that the 2008 global financial crisis caused masses of people around the globe to question capitalism, its excesses and long-time viability.

Bhutan stood up and decided to measure society on levels beyond the usual gross domestic product (GDP). Citizens were asked countless questions about their relationships, health, psychological wellbeing, good governance, economy and culture.

Bhutan Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering told CNN last month that, "when we say Gross National Happiness, it is not the celebrative 'Ha Ha - Ho ho' kind of happiness that we look for in life. It only means contentment, control of your mind, control of wants in your life. Don't be jealous with others, be happy with what you have, be

compassionate, be a society where you can be more than happy to share."

Today the residents of the small, Buddhist Himalayan kingdom are not the best examples of supreme happiness with rising unemployment, growing challenges from climate change and lack of decent infrastructure. And yet some citizens interviewed by National Public Radio (NPR) this year said that they were pleased with the monarchy's largesse as education and healthcare is free.

GNH has arguably been fetishised in the West as the potential cure-all for societal ills bedeviling developed nations. It's not, but it's certainly much more advanced than the countless metrics used by Western governments that remain obsessed with economic growth. Even the OECD is examining this month how to "look beyond GDP" at a conference in Paris.

I've spent the last five years investigating the global war on drugs from Honduras to Guinea-Bissau, the Philippines to the US and the UK to Australia. The drug war both criminalises the most vulnerable in every society and has done nothing to reduce drug use or abuse. Legalising and regulating all drugs is the most sensible solution to remove the influence of criminal networks

and provide clean drugs for those who need or want it. A Ministry of Happiness is sorely needed to address the vast inequalities caused by this endless and futile drug war.

A Ministry of Happiness would challenge the entire philosophy behind today's officialdom. A fully-funded department would investigate the reasons that so many Australians are depressed and lonely from lack of family ties to poor or stagnant wage growth to the rising cost of living. The ministry would actively push for a significant increase in wages, better funded health care and education, a fully-funded disability scheme and widespread investment in renewable technologies (while supporting communities that will suffer with the transition away from dirty energy sources).

None of these decisions guarantee happiness in the community but they're likely to stimulate significant public debate about what could bring greater societal contentment.

An engaged Ministry of Happiness would push for the use of psychedelic drugs by trained doctors to treat depression, PTSD, end of life stress and treating a range of addictions. There is now vast evidence from credible scientific studies that many patients who use drugs such as ecstasy, LSD, magic

mushrooms or ayahuasca can significantly improve their mental state with relatively few sessions.

Dr Robin Carhart-Harris, head of Imperial Psychedelic Research Group at Imperial University in London, told me that it's conceivable in the coming years that a patient would visit a doctor and instead of being given an anti-depressant pill for a mental ailment would be referred to a psychedelic treatment centre where psychedelic drugs could be administered under professional supervision. A Ministry of Happiness would fund these facilities with state money.

Of course, psychedelic drugs can't solve an individual's family or relationship problems but can refresh and rewire the brain to allow a person to more easily cope with life's challenges.

A Ministry of Happiness is a logical addition to governments at a time when the public regards most politicians with contempt. Such an initiative would show that our elected officials are serious about addressing some of the most pressing issues of our age.

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Some countries have already tried to measure the happiness of their citizens. Picture: Shutterstock