

# So what else is new?

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## Muddled thinking on the third way to happiness

Ethical work risks ushering in a new paternalism and a wellbeing that is not necessarily moral

If you're happy and you're Tory, clap your hands. So skilfully is the young pretender, David Cameron, pressing buttons on wellbeing, quality of life and happiness that charges of superficiality and empty trendiness are coming thick and fast. But a deeper examination of his recent speeches shows an underlying rigour that his political opponents would be foolish to underestimate.

Read his recent musings on general wellbeing and you'll find a coherent piece of conservative thinking – the old-school version, not the neoliberal one. “What makes us happy, above all, is a sense of belonging,” says Cameron, “strong relationships with friends, family and the immediate world around us. That’s about permanence, not change. It’s about the personal, not the commercial.”

Compare this with the definition of conservatism given by the doyen of 20th-century Tory thinkers, Michael Oakeshott: “A propensity to use and enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be ... To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.”

To me, that sounds exactly like the clarion call of today's happiness gurus, to which Cameron and his ideas team have subscribed. Indeed, to prefer “the sufficient to the superabundant”, to “delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be”, sums up almost perfectly the advice of figures such as the happiness mandarin – and Labour lord – Richard Layard.

When Layard argues for restrictions on advertising, discouragement of easy divorce and a stern “reform” of youth culture, on the basis of studies of reported happiness levels, you start to see our new “third way” forming – a new middle ground between the main political contestants.

The “Blameron” charge is old news. What fascinates me, however, is what happens when the happiness and wellbeing agenda, whether peddled by

Gordon Brown or Cameron, clashes with the irrepressible tensions of third-way politics, indeed of market democracy.

It's a delicious irony, for example, that Cameron's speech on wellbeing was delivered at a conference organised by Google. Is there any force in the world that so thoroughly subverts a “philosophic conservatism”? Every one of the Oakeshottian virtues is unravelled by the things that search engine can do. Want to access the unknown, the untried, the mysterious, the possible, the unbounded, the distant, and most certainly the superabundant? It's only a few keystrokes and a mouse-click away.

I'm similarly intrigued by Cameron's critique of “the Protestant work ethic” as a barrier to true happiness – and his advocacy of ethical work as an alternative. Cameron trashes Charles Handy's idea of the “portfolio career”, but deliberately misrepresents it in the process.

Handy was arguing that the “job for life” is over, because of the need for permanent reskilling in the information economy – but he wasn't arguing that this means a chaotic tumble from job to job instead. A portfolio career was, ideally, a life of simultaneous possibilities – where one's technical skills, civic aspirations, emotional commitments and creative urges could find their purchase in the marketplace and in society. We modern people “contain multitudes”, as Walt Whitman once put it. To that extent, the duteousness and passivity implied by the Protestant work ethic are truly dead.

Against this, Cameron implicitly lines up with yet another Labour-friendly academic, Richard Sennett. In his recent book *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Sennett calls for companies to recognise that people want their lives to have a narrative, in which they feel in charge of their overall existence. If they want to make the best of us, businesses should not treat us as purely slaves to globalised competition: they should provide (as Cameron puts it) “opportunities that balance work with the personal relationships and the personal values that actually make us happy”.

But I suspect that modern people don't want only one strong narrative in their lives – or that, if they do, the dangers of a new paternalism are at hand. Cameron cites Asda as an example of the

win-win of flexible working. The more measures introduced by the company that responded to family exigencies such as childcare and school holidays, the better its rates of absenteeism and performance.

All well and good. But I once spent a day at Asda's Leeds HQ for this newspaper, 10 years ago, observing its operations from morning till evening. I was alarmed by the kind of corporate mind control on display. I watched a morning team session in which staff were whipped into a state of flushed excitement about that day's sales targets or shelf arrangements. The passions raised seemed absurdly, almost cruelly incommensurate to the tasks outlined. Is this what “ethical work” implies?

So Cameron's “capitalism with commitment” might be about a partial return to the days of Company Man (and Woman): a 21st-century update of a 1950s dream state, where strong, co-parented families and noble, efficient labours compose a stable, contented society. Sound familiar? Brown will hardly be peddling anything much different when his ascension is complete.

In a world where systemic global crises – from terrorism to disease, immigration to environmental degradation – meet us daily on our doorsteps, in our streets and in our inboxes, does a politics of happiness really give us the strength of character to match those challenges? Both Brown and Cameron carefully maintain global perspectives, whether economic or environmental, as a part of their electoral pitch.

But surely a degree of unhappiness – maybe even of angry dissatisfaction – is required from us as a response to the global horrors and tragedies that the media (an institution implicitly distrusted by the happiness gurus) thankfully bring to our attention? Otherwise these “well beings” will not be ethical beings – however secure their family lives, however fulfilling their jobs, however “happy” they feel.

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