OPINION

In the last issue of *Family Matters*, we published a lead article by Richard Eckersley, 'Redefining Progress: Shaping the Future to Human Needs', in which he argued that economic growth was no longer contributing to an improved quality of life. Indeed, he argued that modern society is becoming 'increasingly hostile to our wellbeing', and he suggested the need for a fundamental change in the way we think about 'progress'.

Here, we publish a critique of Richard Eckersley's paper, by Peter Saunders, together with a response from Richard Eckersley.

The issues raised in this debate are as contentious as they are significant, and we invite readers to have their say. To express your view, write to the Editor. We shall publish a selection of letters in the next issue. (See pages 2 and 53 for details.)

IN DEFENCE OF PROGRESS

A response to Richard Eckersley

Peter Saunders

The traditional argument against capitalism and the market system was always that the system had difficulty in meeting the material needs of the mass of the population. Back in the nineteenth century, for example, critics like Frederick Engels pointed to the harshness and misery endured by the industrial working classes, and they argued that things would only get worse as capitalism developed. Quite simply, the rich would get richer while the poor would become more numerous and ever more desperate.

Today, this argument has been turned on its head. Whereas critics used to claim that capitalism cannot deliver mass prosperity, they now argue that it delivers too much of it. What we need, say today's critics, is not a system that can generate sustained economic growth, but rather a new system which will put a halt to this growth.

Richard Eckersley's article in the last issue of *Family Matters* is a case in point. Australians, he tells us, are now on average nearly five times richer in real terms than they were one hundred years ago. On current trends, he says, we will be twice as wealthy in twenty years time as we are today. All this means that the mass of the population today can take for granted life styles which would have been unimaginable to all but the most privileged just a generation or two earlier.

Rather than welcoming, even applauding, this historically unprecedented achievement, however, Eckersley is worried by it. Not only does all this economic growth mean that we are using more energy than we used to (an argument which tends to overlook constant innovation and the development of new and ever more efficient technologies), but sustained economic growth has also apparently contributed to a decline in what he calls 'the quality of life'. According to Eckersley, we are all richer, but we are less happy, and less fulfilled, as a result.

It follows, he says, that we should now 'question prevailing assumptions about economic growth' and that the economy should 'be driven by different values towards different ends'. But is it true that economic growth has now become more a force for bad than for good, producing more misery than it does happiness?

Eckersley argues that we now live in a society which is 'increasingly hostile to our wellbeing'. The evidence he assembles in support of this bold contention falls broadly into two categories:

- *Various social indicators* suggest that Australian society has become an unhappy place in which to live. Child poverty and youth unemployment are both running at over 20 per cent. Divorce rates, crime rates, drug abuse and suicidal behaviour are all rising. Eckersley even quotes evidence suggesting that as many as one-third of young people are suffering 'significant psychological distress or disturbance' and that almost two-thirds of university undergraduates have suicidal tendencies.
- *Attitude surveys* reveal that people are unhappy about the society in which they live. 'Most' young people, apparently, are uninspired by the 'visions of the future held up to them by society' (although they are 'happy and optimistic' about their own prospects), and half of all Australian adults told opinion pollsters in 1997 that 'life was getting worse'. Pausing briefly from admiring their homes, cars and swimming pools, and putting to one side the holiday brochures, nearly two-thirds of a sample of 'middle Australians' apparently agreed that the quality of life is declining and that there is 'too much greed and consumerism'.

Four culprits are identified as having brought about this 'society hostile to our wellbeing' – bad parenting (conflict, separation, abuse and neglect); youth cultures resistant to adults but open to media influence; increasing social inequalities and unemployment; and 'society's failure' to provide a culture which generates hope and a sense of purpose.

What are we to make of all this?

First, I think we are entitled to be a little sceptical about some of the research findings reported in Eckersley's paper. If studies really do find that one-third of young people are psychologically distressed or disturbed, or that two-thirds of students each year seriously think about killing themselves, then perhaps we should start asking questions about the design of the studies and the measurement of their indicators before we start criticising the society which is said to be generating these astonishing levels of despair.

Similarly, there are major debates surrounding the measurement of poverty which should make us pause before accepting Eckersley's claim that over one-fifth of Australian children live in poverty. The Henderson poverty line has often been challenged, and the most recent research (reported in *The Age,* 12 February 1999) suggests anyway that the proportion of children living in 'poverty' in Australia has actually been falling and is now no higher than 13 per cent, even on a fairly generous definition of 'poverty'.

Second, we know that what people say to attitude pollsters may have little relation to what they actually believe or to how they actually behave. Several times in his paper, Eckersley admits that the very same people who are apparently so convinced that things are getting worse very often readily admit that their own situation is actually getting better. What this suggests is that everyday experience is producing feelings of satisfaction while received wisdoms taken from the media, politicians and other distant sources are generating fairly superficial responses of apparent dissatisfaction.

For example, 'everybody knows' by now the 'appropriate' response if we are asked about the state of the global environment. Few people will tell you that things are improving, but few probably know or even care very deeply about the issue. Similarly, there is no shortage of people willing to criticise the modern pathologies of excessive 'individualism' and 'consumerism', but this is all at an abstract level. In their day to day lives, people continue to enjoy the individual autonomy and material comfort which the modern world affords them. And it really comes as no surprise to learn that young people bemoan the state of their society. Was it not ever thus?

The question, then, is not so much whether you can get people to agree to a set of gloomy statements, as how relevant such issues are to their everyday lives and how deeply they hold their opinions about them. Certainly research at the Australian Institute of Family Studies has found that the great majority of Australians appear to be remarkably contented with most aspects of their lives (see Weston 1997).

Third, we should be aware of contradictions within Eckersley's own argument. In particular, he believes that a radical redistribution of income and wealth would increase human happiness, yet this is itself a materialistic solution to what he sees as a problem caused by excessive materialism! If 'economism', 'individualism' and 'consumerism' really do lie at the root of our contemporary problems, then it makes little sense to advocate materialistic policies as part of the solution. He complains about 'greed' and 'avarice' in society, but he overlooks the possibility that demands from those with relatively less that they be given more may themselves be motivated by greed and avarice. The rich and prosperous have no monopoly over such vices, and by reinforcing people's demands to be given more, Eckersley is in danger of contributing to the very malaise which he is seeking to cure.

Fourth, Eckersley is often reluctant to hold individuals in any way responsible for their own misery or happiness. It is 'society' which is to blame for the failure to supply young people with an inspiring vision of the future. It is 'society' that has failed to provide people with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. But as Charles Murray points out, 'society' cannot make us happy! All that we can ask is that the

RICHARD ECKERSLEY REPLIES

Richard Eckersley

The simplest response I could make to Peter Saunders' critique of my paper, *Redefining Progress*, would be to suggest that people read, or re-read, the paper and draw their own conclusions about the merits of our arguments. I hope some will. However, most will probably have neither the time nor the inclination to do this so, for them, let me offer some comments on Saunders' analysis. I will group these under three headings: economic growth and wellbeing; the choice and use of social indicators; and the relationship between the individual and society.

Economic growth and wellbeing

Saunders says or implies that I call for a halt to growth; bemoan the historical achievements of growth; argue that our social problems are the product of economic prosperity alone; and suggest that a radical redistribution of wealth and income would increase happiness. But I did none of these things.

I described a threshold hypothesis which states that economic growth (as currently defined and derived) improves quality of life up to a point, beyond which further growth may lead to a decline in quality of life. I cited evidence from indicators such as the Genuine Progress Indicator and subjective measures of social quality of life to support this possibility (the GPI suggests the turning point came in the 1970s). Winding back 100 or 200 years of material progress is not at issue.

I questioned the status accorded to the rate of growth as the prime benchmark of government policy, given the doubtfulness of the two key assumptions behind growth – that it is increasing wellbeing and is ecologically sustainable (the latter a point Saunders virtually ignores). I argued that the task was not simply to abandon growth, but to move beyond growth – to focus not just on the rate of growth, but also on its content, and look more closely at what was growing, what effects this growth was having and what alternatives might exist. Wealth distribution was, therefore, only one element of this task, and discussed mainly in the context of the adverse effects of inequality on health, on which there is a large and growing medical literature (Dixon 1999).

In discussing social problems, especially the problems of young people, I did not argue that these were solely the

conditions should be in place which *enable* us to pursue happiness. This means that we should not be short of food and basic material needs (something which everybody now accepts capitalism is very good at providing), that we should not be blocked in our attempt to develop and fulfil our potential, and so on. But once these conditions are met, it is for individuals to find their own 'visions' for the future, their own sense of 'meaning' in the lives they create for themselves. There is no sense in demanding of 'society' that it should make us happy.

Fifth, and most importantly, there is little evidence to support Eckersley's claim that growth and prosperity is a direct cause of our present malaise. Indeed, there are good grounds for arguing that a halt to economic growth would unleash more misery than happiness.

Eckersley claims that relatively wealthy societies like Australia have passed some ill-defined threshold point beyond which further growth no longer generates increased happiness. But when, exactly, did we pass that point? When precisely did we reach the point at which economic growth should have been halted?

Was it before the industrial revolution, when most people lived in conditions which make even the poorest of Australia's families today look like royalty? Was it at some time around World War I, when millions lived mean and cramped lives working in conditions which nobody today would tolerate? Was it, perhaps, at a more recent time, when people had radios but no televisions, or before penicillin and modern antibiotics, or before ordinary people were able to travel to foreign countries, or before satellites and cables linked the world in almost instantaneous communication? When, exactly, did economic growth and technological progress stop contributing to the sum of human happiness? Was there ever a point in history when one generation would conceivably have thanked their parents for abandoning economic and technological development?

Of course Eckersley is right to insist that today, as in the past, we confront real and pressing social problems. But these cannot be said to add up to a society which is 'hostile to our wellbeing', and they cannot be explained as the products of economic prosperity.

Eckersley has selected his negative 'social indicators' very carefully. Why did he not take average life expectancy as his key indicator of societal wellbeing? After all, life itself must surely be the primary condition of human happiness. But average life expectancy continues to rise with the economic growth which industrial capitalism continues to generate. One hundred years ago, Australian men could expect to live to 51, women to 55. By the middle of the twentieth century, these figures had risen to around 67 and 73 respectively. By the 1990s, average life expectancy for men was 75 and for women it was 80. One hundred years of growth has produced, on average, thirty more years of life for each person born today. When, exactly, should we have put a stop to this? How does this represent the antithesis to wellbeing?

result of economic prosperity, but of a range of social, economic and cultural trends in modern Western societies, including changes in the family, education, work and the media. Saunders does mention these other factors, but because his critique focuses strongly on the issue of economic growth, he gives the impression I am laying all our ills at its door: for example, saying our problems 'cannot be explained as the products of economic prosperity'. And while he makes repeated references to some of the five cultural traits that I discussed – economism, consumerism, postmodernism, pessimism and individualism – he never really addresses my arguments about their effects on values and so on personal and social wellbeing.

Social indicators

Saunders dismisses several indicators on which I base my case (and which don't fit his), while providing scant evidence or argument for doing this. He ignores other indicators altogether. Thus he questions the research findings on young people's psychosocial wellbeing, suggesting the design of the studies may be flawed. He may be right, but unless he is familiar with the research and can suggest what is wrong with it, his criticism rings hollow. Let me take two examples of the research Saunders questions.

A study of Australians' mental health and wellbeing, published last year, found that those aged 18–24 had the highest prevalence of mental disorders during the 12 months prior to the survey – 27 per cent – with prevalence declining with age to 6 per cent among those 65 and over (ABS 1998). The survey covered anxiety disorders, affective disorders (such as depression), and substance-use disorders. The study notes that because the survey did not cover all forms of mental health problems, it may underestimate the extent of mental disorder in Australia.

The survey was carried out by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and involved a sample of 10,600 adult Australians. It used a questionnaire endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and trained interviewers to assess the prevalence of mental disorders through the measurement of symptoms and their impact on daily life. Expert groups that provided advice on the survey content and design included: the WHO Centre at the University of NSW, the National Health and Medical Research Council Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Centre at the Australian National University, the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of NSW, the departments of psychiatry at the universities of Western Australia, Melbourne and Adelaide, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. A technical advisory committee endorsed the validity of the survey instrument and the ABS tested it under household survey conditions.

The second example is the study of university undergraduates that found almost two-thirds admitted to suicidal ideation (thoughts) or behaviour in the previous 12 months (Schweitzer et al. 1995). The study of over 1,600 students was conducted by researchers at the Queensland University of Technology and the University of Queensland and published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. While the prevalence of ideation is high compared to other studies (which nonetheless reveal disturbingly high levels of ideation and attempt), I cited it for two reasons: it involved an older age group that suicide statistics suggest is more at risk than the secondary students on which the other studies I'm aware of were based; and it included a broad and scaled definition of ideation, so illustrating well my point about a gradient of distress among young people.

The study found 21 per cent revealed minimum ideation, agreeing they had felt that 'life just isn't worth living', or that 'life is so bad I feel like giving up'. Another 19 per cent revealed high ideation, agreeing they had wished 'my life would end', or that they had been 'thinking of ways to kill myself'. A further 15 per cent showed suicide-related behaviour, saying they had told someone 'I want to kill myself', or had 'come close to taking my own life'. Finally, 7 per cent said they had 'made attempts to kill myself'.

Maybe we can debate whether those identified in the ABS study really had a clinical illness, or whether the

Much the same argument can be developed in respect of a host of other crucial indicators (see Sullivan et al. 1997). At the beginning of this century, childbirth was still a hazardous business for both mother and baby. Six in every thousand births in Australia resulted in the death of the mother. Today the figure is one in 25 thousand. Of every thousand children born in the early years of this century, 33 died within the first 28 days, and more than one hundred died within a year. Today the equivalent figures are ten and seven, and the trend lines are still falling.

Even taking some of Eckersley's own indicators, the picture is nowhere near as bleak as he paints it. Unemployment is high relative to the 1950s and 1960s, but it is not much higher than it was in the early part of this century. The economy, meanwhile, has absorbed a huge rise in the number of women employed over the intervening period (from less than 20 per cent to over 50 per cent) and has replaced a lot of dangerous and back-breaking jobs with safer and less strenuous ones.

Suicide rates, similarly, have bobbed up and down through the century, but they are roughly the same now as they were in 1903.

There are two key indicators where Eckersley is, however, fully justified in pointing to really dramatic changes over the last fifty years or so. One is in rising rates of crime. The other is in changing patterns of family life.

Most readers of this journal are well aware of the dramatic changes that have taken place in family life – most notably, the rise in divorce rates (a 300 per cent increase since the 1960s), the rise in cohabitation outside marriage (more than a 300 per cent rise since the mid-seventies), and the rise in births outside marriage (a six-fold increase in the last 40 years). Today in Australia, more than 700,000 children live solely with one parent as a result of the rise in rates of divorce and ex-nuptial births, and many more live in reconstituted families.

Barry Maley, whose figures these are, concludes that there has been 'a profound decline in parental participation in the lives of a large proportion of children, and in their relations with their natural parents, within the space of 30 years' (1996, p.26). He goes on to point out that, at the same time as divorce rates and the number of children growing up without a father have been rising, crimes recorded by the police have also been escalating (a doubling in the short period since 1981). He is not the first to link the 'decline in parenting' to the rising trends in the crime rate.

Eckersley, by contrast, believes that the wave of criminal activity is more the product of our society's malaise of materialism, rather than of the way particular sets of parents raise their children.

These two arguments are not necessarily incompatible. Eckersley's emphasis on consumerism and materialism is pertinent in that it reminds us that economic growth has increased the number of goods there are to steal (the opportunities for crime), as well as raising people's material aspirations and expectations.

This cannot of itself explain the rising crime rate, however. The question which is still left begging is why young people today are more *willing* to break the law than they ➤

suicidal ideation revealed in the Queensland study was serious and sustained (rather than a moment of despair or despondency in an otherwise tolerable-to-happy year). But from my point of view, this is not the most important issue, which is that the findings do suggest that modern life has, indeed, become hostile to the wellbeing of a significant proportion of young people.

Other new research is also revealing the real costs of the lust for riches our culture promotes. American psychologists have found that not only is having more things unfulfilling, but that people for whom affluence is a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall wellbeing ('Dark side of American dream: money can't buy wellbeing'), *International Herald Tribune*, 3 February 1999, p.1). The research shows there are substantial psychological penalties associated with valuing 'extrinsic goals' such as money, fame and beauty. Referring to the 'dark side of the American dream', the researchers say that our culture seems to be built on precisely what turned out to be detrimental to mental health. This is exactly my point.

Saunders says that what people say in attitude polls may have little relation to what they actually believe or to how they actually behave. As evidence, he says I admit several times that people convinced that things are getting worse readily say their own situation is getting better (actually I say they are personally satisfied and optimistic). This suggests, he says, that everyday experience produces satisfaction, but received wisdom from the media and other distant sources are generating superficial responses of apparent dissatisfaction.

While it is true that some broader concerns may not impact greatly on our personal satisfaction, the evidence I cite from – for example, the Middle Australia Project – doesn't bear out the claim that these concerns all have 'distant sources' or are 'superficial' (Pusey 1998). There is also another explanation for the difference between how people feel about themselves and how they feel about society at large; I have discussed this matter at length elsewhere (Eckersley, invited paper under review).

Research suggests that personal happiness or life satisfaction is a homeostatic condition and relatively independent of external circumstances – that is, we adjust expectations and standards and employ cognitive devices to maintain satisfaction and happiness at a relatively stable, and high, level (Cummins, submitted for publication). This is one reason why wealth is a poor predictor of happiness, and why, in the developed world, people have not become happier as their societies have become wealthier.

Saunders says I selected my indicators carefully, and asks why I did not use life expectancy, which shows a dramatic improvement over the past 100 years, as a key indicator. In fact, I did cite life expectancy – as one of five indicators of Australia's development over the past 100–150 years – and acknowledged its impressive rise. I also noted that life expectancy was rising steadily when per capita GDP was not, suggesting that our greater longevity had less to do with economic growth than was often believed (and claimed by Saunders) and more to do with other factors such as better public health, education and housing (the indicator trends and their significance are discussed in Eckersley 1998).

Saunders' interpretation of other statistics can also be challenged. On the unemployment rate, he says the economy has absorbed a huge rise in the number of employed women, implying it has performed well in generating jobs; in fact, the employment-to-population ratio has been relatively steady over the past 20 years (when unemployment has been high) because of declining participation by young people and older men (Richardson 1998). He endorses Maley's close linking of more crime with more divorce; however, the rise in crime precedes the rise in divorce (although I agree family factors contribute to crime).

Saunders says the Henderson poverty line has often been challenged, and reports new findings that suggest child poverty has fallen. Since those results have become available I have included them in my analysis (for example, 'Generation Wrecked', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 1999, p.10). However, one of Australia's leading poverty researchers, Peter Saunders – another Peter Saunders – says that while the poverty line has been ➤

were in previous generations. Rising materialism provides the opportunity, but it does not explain the motive.

When we try to explain the growth in the number of people who are willing to break the law, we are driven back towards the kinds of explanations which Maley offers. There is, after all, no great puzzle as to why people break the law; unlawful behaviour will tend to occur *unless* young people are brought up respecting a strongly-internalised moral code (what Adam Smith called 'the spectator in the breast'), which makes the very idea of such behaviour seem unthinkable and shameful to them, and *unless* there is a reasonable assumption that bad behaviour will be found out and punished.

If crime rates are escalating, the two primary causes almost certainly lie in changes in the way our children are being socialised (at school and by the media, as well as in the family), coupled with changes in the system of policing and punishment. There is precious little evidence to link these unwelcome developments to the continued success of the capitalist economy. Prosperity has enabled crime to escalate but it has not caused it.

We live in an age which has grown accustomed to blaming 'systems' for the faults of individuals. This avoids the discomfort of holding others accountable for their actions, and it allows us the indulgence of designing new systems which we hope will somehow work better. It is easy, as Eckersley does, to locate the blame for our current difficulties in 'society's failure to provide an adequate cultural framework' or in the failure of 'society' to inspire us with 'visions of the future'.

It is much harder to come to terms with the idea that we ourselves might have something to answer for, and that the solutions might lie in demanding higher standards of ourselves and those around us, rather than making ever-more utopian demands on the 'society' to which we all belong but for which none of us seems ultimately willing to accept responsibility.

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Peter Saunders is the newly appointed Research Manager at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and was formerly Professor of Sociology at the University of Sussex, England. Some of the arguments in this article are developed further in his book, Capitalism: A Social Audit (Routledge, London, 1996).

extensively criticised, to date 'no viable alternative has been proposed and the Henderson poverty line continues to be widely used to measure poverty' (Saunders 1998).

The individual and society

Perhaps the most puzzling of Saunders' criticisms is his claim that I am reluctant to hold individuals responsible for their own misery or happiness, choosing instead to blame society. I have two points to make about this.

The first is the inconsistency in his own argument. He says that once our basic material and other needs are met, it is for individuals to find their own visions for the future and their own sense of meaning. Yet later, in discussing crime, he stresses the importance of bringing up young people to respect 'a strongly-internalised moral code', and the effect on this upbringing of changes in the way our children are being socialised by family, school and media.

Saunders would appear to believe that moral values are a product of the individual's socialisation, but not how they see the future or where they find meaning in life. I, on the other hand, see people's worldview and sense of meaning and purpose as strongly related to their values, and that all these result from a dynamic and complex interaction between the individual and society.

My second point, then, is that far from holding others unaccountable for their actions, or denying that solutions might lie in ourselves, I stated that viewing the serious problems and challenges we faced in terms of our values re-established their links with our personal lives. I said: 'Change will come about from choices, individually taken as citizens and consumers, parents and professionals, which reflect a collective will to think and do things differently'.

In summary, Peter Saunders' defence of material progress rests on an inaccurate, or at best incomplete, representation of my case against it, and a good deal of unsubstantiated opinion and assertion. Leaving aside the other defining features of modern Western societies, I am left wondering why he, and many others, seem unwilling even to countenance the possibility that ever-increasing material wealth is not the be-all and end-all of human wellbeing, and may even harm it.

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