

# The sun sets on the enlightenment heralding the start of a very different age...

Can the ideals that underpinned the Enlightenment guide us towards 21st-century progress? Richard Reeves argues that we need to find new ways to discuss the meaning of happiness

Words by Richard Reeves. Illustration by Malcolm Garrett RDI

Cast your mind back to the 1997 general election. Remember the ubiquitous anthem of the Labour campaign? "Things...can only get better....can only get better...now I've found you..." The upbeat message of the song captured the spirit of the campaign, even if — contemplating the post-Black Wednesday twitching corpse of the Conservative party — the thought that things could possibly be any worse was beyond most people.

In the 2000 US election, Al Gore said he wanted to see "an America that is not only better off but better". The common theme of betterment begs a profound question. What is better? Is life today "better" than 20 years ago? And how will we know if it is better in 2020 than it is today? What does 21st-century progress look like?

The truth is that most contemporary politicians have no idea. In the last couple of decades, the very idea of progress has lost its moorings. The principal means through which western societies have advanced throughout modern history — economic growth — is faltering: richer no longer means better. We have lost the philosophical comfort of the cold war, which at least provided a clear picture of what we were not. And science and technology now often appear as handmaidens to scary futures full of cloned people with microchips in their eyelids, rather than offering escape routes from disease and want.

If we measure our progress in terms of our happiness or evaluation of our own well-being, we have not advanced for half a century. Ancient questions about the nature of the "good life", questions to which the Enlightenment seemed to have the answers, need to be asked all over again. What, as Aristotle asked, is the Good for Man? For only by having a clear view of where it is we want to go can we stand any chance of determining our path. We need to rejuvenate the spirit and reinvent the sense of progress, or be condemned to managerial politics bleached of idealism and vision, corporate short-sightedness and disillusionment.

It used to be so much easier. For a couple of centuries at least, the Enlightenment cocktail of freedom from religious

oppression, economic growth driven by commerce and scientific endeavour combined to make people's lives unarguably better: more personal autonomy; greater freedom from the threat of hunger, sickness and death; richer and more varied experience.

The primary engine of progress was economic growth, which reduced inequality, increased geographical and social mobility, met basic needs and provided funds for health, education and welfare systems. There were costs, not least social dislocation and the weakening of family ties, but in terms of human well-being, these losses were outweighed by the hefty gains on the other side of the scales.

The progressive nature of economic growth shows up in international data on "subjective well-being" — the extent to which people think their life is good. Taking all the countries for which there are robust figures, there is a statistically significant correlation between subjective well-being and Gross Domestic Product per head. But, and here's the really hard rub, only up to a point. Research by Robert Lane, Ed Diener, Ruut Veenhoven and others shows that above a certain point, around \$10,000 GDP per head (about where Portugal is now), the correlation between growth and happiness dips, and then disappears.

Since the mid-1960s, the economies of the US, UK, France, Holland and Ireland at least doubled in size. In all cases, the proportion of people saying they felt satisfied with their life remained unchanged. By contrast, people's sense of well-being in Mexico, India and The Philippines increased, broadly in line with economic growth rates.

The US continues to "enjoy" rapid economic growth, but according to some social scientists is seeing a decline in the quality of people's lives. The proportion of Americans who view themselves as "very happy" has fallen from 35 to 30% and rates of depression are up. Henry Thoreau's claim in the 19th century that Americans know more about how to make a living than how to live, was prescient.

Given that the US is the most advanced economy in the world, and the model of free-market economic philosophy,



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the apparent reversal of the link between economic growth and the good life is salutary. There are already signs in the UK that mental health problems are on the rise, and that levels of trust are falling. Yet national policies blindly pursue "productivity" and "competitiveness". Keynes himself warned of this danger: "But chiefly, let us not overestimate the importance of the economic problem, or sacrifice to its supposed necessities other matters of greater and more permanent significance."

So wealth creation in wealthy nations doesn't make their average citizen happier. What about individuals in those societies? Surely a bigger pay-packet makes them happier? Well, no. While it is the case that richer people are, on average, happier than poorer people, those already above the poverty line who become still richer experience no long-term increase in happiness. Sure, we feel better for a while after a big pay rise. But our expectations quickly catch up, leaving us no more satisfied than before, as the work of Richard Easterlin shows: "Even though rising income means people can have more goods, the favourable effect of this on welfare is erased by the fact that people want more as they progress." In other words, we get stuck on a "hedonic treadmill", with our desires matching and outstripping our possessions. Money is no longer buying us happiness. Not that any of this research stops most of us from thinking that money will do the trick. John D Rockefeller, when his net worth had just been estimated at \$3bn, confided to a friend: "I feel no sense of security. Now if I just had \$4bn..."

It seems, then, as if the theory of diminishing returns, one of the most important foundation stones of economic thought, can be strongly applied to economics itself, or as Robert Lane puts it in his groundbreaking book, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, "the waning power of income to yield that ephemeral good utility".

But the penny hasn't dropped yet. Our cultures, political systems, yardsticks of success have utterly failed to adapt to the new world, one in which economics does not equal or even equate to progress. Governments remain as obsessed as ever with economic productivity and growth. No serious challenge has yet been mounted to the Enlightenment model of rationalist economic growth — a model that served us so well for so long, but is now past its sell-by date.

Lane argues that most of us, but perhaps especially the political classes, are still in thrall to the "economistic fallacy, namely that beyond poverty levels, higher incomes increase subjective well-being". His caveat ("beyond poverty levels") is important: people in poor countries, and the poor in rich countries, will benefit from higher incomes. From a happiness standpoint, then, the case for redistribution is overwhelming. The bigger question is what constitutes progress for the "affluent majority" in affluent nations?

Of course, few people have ever argued that money is in itself a good thing. Aristotle said that "wealth is obviously not the good we are seeking, because it serves only as a means" — for getting something else. Two and a half millennia later, a character in a *New Yorker* cartoon makes the same point. "It's never been about the money", he says. "It's about the cool stuff money can buy."

The "something else" Aristotle had in mind probably included food, drink and shelter — unquestionable goods.

The problem with the "cool stuff" in late capitalist societies is that it doesn't, in the long-term, make our lives feel any better to us. Economic "goods" are no good anymore. And just as the power of economics is on the wane, so science, the second child of the Enlightenment, has become a less agreeable companion to progress: GM foods (frankenfoods in tabloidese); MMR jabs; DNA testing by insurance firms; anthrax; human cloning. Science and technology, once the unproblematic harbingers of good — electricity, planes, medical advances, labour-saving domestic devices — are now less likely to inspire celebration than concern.

Emma Rothschild argues cogently in *Economic Sentiments* that the core of the Enlightenment promise was the "unfrightened mind", freed by economics from the fear of imminent starvation and by rational science from the fear of eternal damnation. Against this benchmark, we have gone into reverse, especially, perhaps, after 11 September. According to Richard Tomkins, writing in the *Financial Times*, "anxiety has become western civilisation's leitmotif."

The slow sunset of the Enlightenment poses a profound challenge to both sides of the political spectrum. Those on the centre-left are often referred to, and refer to themselves as "progressives" — Peter Mandelson has just launched a new journal called *Progressive Politics*; David Blunkett's disappointing book is called *Politics and Progress*; David Marquand describes what he sees as the unhelpful divorce of labour and liberal strands of political life as the "progressive dilemma". But what does being progressive mean in the absence of a clear vision of progress?

The New Oxford definition of progress is "forward or onward movement towards a destination". The political left used to have a clear idea of the destination: universal, tax-funded public services, redistributive taxes and benefits, and Keynesian demand management. What's the destination now? Labour talks a great deal about traditional left-wing values in a modern setting, in an electorally successful attempt to marry its past with its present. What's lacking is any definite sense of the future. Indeed, thinking about the future at all is often dismissed as "utopian".

Without a discernible view of what they are for, those of a liberal or leftist disposition have come increasingly to define themselves in terms of what they are against. Some of the most powerful movements of the last few decades have come with an explicit or implicit "anti" prefix: racism, apartheid, nuclear weapons, and latterly globalisation are among the evils that "progressives" are opposed to. (Quite what the anti-globalisation campaigners are in favour of is hugely diverse and usually anyone's guess.)

Lacking any agreed benchmarks of success has made the left better at opposing than proposing. Many of these campaigns have been successful, most are hard to argue with but in the longer-term, neither the "anti-ism" of the non-parliamentary radicals nor the managerialism of the government are adequate. The rusting of the old engines of progress demands a new centre-left idea of the future.

But the impact on the political right is equally great. The basic tenet of right-of-centre thinking for at least the last half of the 20th century was that economic growth, demonstrably best served by *laissez-faire* policies, was the surest path to a better society and better lives. By increasing

the buying power of the populace, through rising incomes and low-as-possible taxes, and simultaneously increasing the choice of products and services available, quality of life would inexorably improve.

And so it did for a while. The cruel irony is that the triumph of the fiercely free-market philosophies of the 1980s — to which the parties of the centre-left had ultimately to adjust themselves — came just at the point in the west's history when more economic development was not going to deliver any more human development.

There are signs that a few Conservatives are beginning to recognise that free-market economics — indeed, economics itself — is now a false God. David Willetts MP, shadow work and pensions secretary, is one who seems to have grasped this. "There is more to life and to politics than economics," he said early in 2002. After warning that the Conservatives became, in the 1980s, "the economics party", he said that now "economics, like patriotism, is not enough".

For help, the modern Conservatives can reach for the writings of one of their most misrepresented heroes: Adam Smith. Seen as the father of free-market economics and pioneer of rationalist thought, Smith was in fact feted by the revolutionaries of 18th-century France, and hugely concerned with human welfare. As Rothschild writes, Smith and his French counterpart Condorcet "were interested in economic life as a process of discussion, and as a process of emancipation". If the Tories can capture Smith's original spirit of emancipation, they might shake off the shackles of the economics edifice built, erringly, in his name.

While the twin turbines of economic growth and scientific endeavour have been losing power for some decades, it is only recently, and patchily, that we have begun to ponder the next stage of the journey. For most of the postwar period, the political philosophy of the west was freed from the disciplines of self-doubt by the presence of state communism. Any failings of liberal democracy and market economics were modest by comparison to the disastrous human experiments of eastern Europe. Any sense that our lives weren't getting any better was dulled by the spectacle of the misery of life under the only apparent alternative. The absence of a clear common purpose was veiled by the presence of a common enemy.

The democratisation of the former communist nations and the end of the cold war has forced a new reckoning. Suddenly the shortfalls of our own system are becoming apparent. The comfort blanket of knowing that others are in much worse shape has been torn away. We have won the cold war, but we're not sure to what end. Single issues have been sprouting up, symptoms of an ill-defined malaise: work-life balance, questioning the centrality of the employment contract; moves towards alternative medicine; corporate social responsibility; environmental movements; the rise of new forms of spirituality; heightened awareness and politicisation of gender issues; sexuality and "new" lifestyles, such as gay parenting.

Most of these issues remain firmly outside the mainstream of political debate. The closest MPs get is in ill-defined discussions of quality of life. The writer Hanif Kureshi suggests that the political has become personal: "If our age seems 'unideological'...it might be because politics

has moved inside, into the body. The politics of personal relationships, of private need, of gender, marriage, sexuality, the place of children, have replaced that of society."

Even if politics has not become entirely personal, it has certainly moved away from manufacturing productivity, GDP and the single currency, towards a concern with family, community and society. There is a widespread sense that things are going wrong. Not obviously wrong, but slowly, almost imperceptibly, wrong. The trouble is we don't know how to put them right — or indeed what right is. Looking ahead, there's no map. This may be part of the explanation for the current craze for the past. History is the new rock 'n' roll; biographies of Churchill, descriptions of the battle of Stalingrad and sketches of the Victorians sell like hot cakes. Historian Ralph LaRossa argues that people need a "usable past" — a history that enables them to engage with the present. But we also need a usable future.

It is time to look to Aristotle. What is the Supreme Good? What is the good life? If money and wealth are on the wane, what should be our guiding star? Well-being? Happiness? Quality of life? Democracy? Fraternity? Development? Justice? Social Justice? Equality? Freedom?

We can be certain that there are no overnight, clever solutions. And while it is becoming clear that a bigger GDP is not sufficient — or indeed necessary — it will take a great deal of time, energy and collective commitment to alter course. The philosophy of wealth creation is embedded at every level of our culture: societal, institutional and personal. Nations chase productivity; firms seek profits; individuals pursue income. Right now, these success measures are simply taken for granted, but unless we start interrogating some of the basic assumptions underpinning our idea of ourselves, our development will stall.

Lane is rather pessimistic: "If people have difficulties identifying the nature and sources of their unhappiness, and if the guiding disciplines share in the people's pluralistic ignorance, and if one cannot identify villains and exploiters in this scenario, and if most people would be better off under another scheme but enough people stand to gain from the way things are to make large-scale persuasion exceptionally difficult, whence cometh our help?"

Whence indeed? The new measures of progress cannot be imposed by Fabian politicians nor honed by data-laden social scientists. We need an honest public conversation about what we want. I'm not sure that whipped and bleeped MPs trapped by an overwhelming desire to create "win-win" solutions, can help us much. The intense interest in the appointment of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, suggests that we may now be looking elsewhere for people to lead our discussion. A renewal of public conversation may in itself contribute to our well-being, reducing people's sense of powerlessness and voicelessness. But we need individuals with the courage, integrity and intelligence to tackle these profound questions with the urgency and maturity they require. Hegel described the Enlightenment as a "perfume" wafting across Europe; now that it's smelling stale, what's next? ■

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#### Further Reading

*The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*  
by Robert E Lane  
Yale University Press

*Economic Sentiments — Adam Smith, Condorcet and the Enlightenment*  
by Emma Rothschild  
Harvard University Press

"Income and happiness: towards a unified theory" by R A Easterlin in *The Economic Journal* July 2001

*The Nicomachean Ethics*  
by Aristotle Penguin

*Culture and Subjective Well-Being* by Ed Diener & Eunkook M Suh (eds)  
MIT Press

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