

# National Well-Being

## Mr Cameron's aspiration

“Grant her in health and wealth long to live.” Secularisation makes a transvaluation of all values, by way of changing the meaning of words. The prayer for the Monarch does not *only* mean: “Let her be free from serious illnesses and may her investments do well,” but how else could it be understood in the contemporary Commons? When the Conservatives try to talk of a politics of national well-being not restricted to GDP, they are literally at a loss for words. (The other parties don't even try.) This is the same as not knowing what they are trying to say, and muddles their efforts.

The word *happiness* is to be avoided, though naturally the media translate “well-being” into “making us happy”. *Happy* won't do because of (from memory) “See how the fates their gifts allot: / Some are happy, some are not.” *Happy*, with its roots in *good hap*, is too close to *lucky*. Even the Conservatives would not promise us good luck, though it can be prayed for in Coverdale's version.

Whether a mere government, and one without a belief, can do anything about a national well-being that goes beyond GDP must be very doubtful. Perhaps the subsidies to the arts are intended to improve national well-being, but whether they have done so is debatable. They are useless without judgement. National well-being has not been improved by the competition given to Blackpool Tower by Tate Modern.

Perhaps again it is a hopeful sign if Mr Cameron has noticed something missing, though he can't say what. But after the policy announcement his first foray into improving national well-being was not promising. He thought it very important that the World Cup [football] should be played in England in 2018, so important that he went in person to the critical FIFA meeting, accompanied by (in ascending order of importance) the Heir Presumptive, the Mayor of London, and Mr David Beckham; and when his great mission failed, he gave a television interview more suitable to a day of national mourning. (Russia was awarded the prize, whether with the aid of bribes is unknown; Mr Putin did not attend.) Anyone with any sense of national well-being knows that sport has a place, but not the place, almost in the mega-popstar league, Mr Cameron gives it. A sense of proportion (as well as a better-informed sense of the likely outcome) would have made him stay at home. The emperor judging the gladiators was not for the well-being of imperial Rome.

Then came the decision to do away with all national subsidies to Arts subjects at universities. This is exactly the wrong way round. Engineering, computer software . . . are thought to contribute directly to national well-being of the kind politicians are used to, *viz.* GDP. What follows

is not that these subjects should be subsidised, but that they can one way or another pay for themselves out of the contribution to GDP. Philosophy, history . . . which *purely* contribute to national well-being but not GDP—they are the subjects that should be state-aided. But with the universities in their present state what difference will it make whether the titular Arts Faculty goes or stays?

In response to the government delusion that bigger universities will somehow make us richer, the universities have become grotesquely oversized, to the extent that they have lost touch with education, that is, the pursuit of wisdom. The consensus that has brought this about cannot be expected suddenly to supply other standards of judgement or to restore the idea of the university that should be part of national well-being.

Mr Cameron ought to begin with language. He speaks a language in which his new aspiration is unspeakable, a language of the uneducated. National well-being would be improved beyond recognition if education were once more expected in the governing classes. GDP might be unaffected, but political *judgement* would deepen.

“Quality of life” is what Lawrence called “depth of vital consciousness”. Could it be seriously claimed that the modern secularised West could rival classical Athens in political understanding of what can possibly go deep in human life? According to Isaiah, Jerusalem is a city full of judgement and nations come to her for wisdom. *All* the sides in the English Civil War knew what they were fighting about, and it wasn't GDP. Mr Cameron has no idea.

If he has a feeling of emptiness where his idea should be, that could be a start. But what follows? He sets up a committee of experts to define well-being, to join the other quango that gives expert advice about moral matters, in both cases unbacked by any philosophy or belief. It is not possible that the committee will have any more of an idea of national well-being than the political parties.

Perhaps Mr Cameron would mean well if he could. At present he does not know enough to be able to mean well. He ought to read more. If he wants to understand national well being let him begin with Plato, Isaiah and the Book of Common Prayer. He could get something from some of his own predecessors in office, including Disraeli and Gladstone. Need one ask whether Mr Cameron has ever read Coleridge? or *Culture and Anarchy*? or *Nor Shall my Sword*—English classics of national well-being?

In our forty-first year we also boast that Mr Cameron should have a look at our shop. Have we any competition in defining national well-being? Many books on our list do so directly, some obliquely, but Mr Cameron should read the lot! including the poetry and fiction.