

# A manifesto for wellbeing

## Preamble

Australians are three times richer than their parents and grandparents were in the 1950s, but they are no happier. Despite the evidence of a decline in national wellbeing, governments continue to put economic interests first. The obsession with economic growth means other things that could improve our wellbeing are sacrificed.

There is widespread community concern that the values of the market—individualism, selfishness, materialism, competition—are driving out the more desirable values of trust, self-restraint, mutual respect and generosity. Many people feel alienated from the political process; the main parties seem too alike and think of progress only in material terms.

The challenge of our age is to build a new politics that is committed, above all, to improving our wellbeing.

## Wellbeing

Throughout history sages have counselled that happiness is not a goal but a consequence of how we live, that it comes from being content with what we have. Today, we are sold a different message—that we will be happy only if we have more money and more of the things money buys. Human experience and scientific research do not support this belief.

Our wellbeing is shaped by our genes, our upbringing, our personal circumstances and choices, and the social conditions in which we live. Our collective wellbeing is improved if we live in a peaceful, flourishing, supportive society, so promoting wellbeing should be a public as well as a personal task.

We often think of wellbeing as happiness, but it is more than that. It is about having meaning in our lives—

developing as a person and feeling that our lives are fulfilling and worthwhile.

Wellbeing comes from having a web of relationships and interests. Family and friends, work, leisure activities and spiritual beliefs can all increase our wellbeing. The intimacy, sense of belonging and support offered by close personal relationships are of greatest value. Material comforts are essential up to a point, and there is no doubt that poverty remains a serious problem in Australia. But for most Australians more money would add little to their wellbeing.

## What can governments do?

Governments can't legislate to make us happy, but many things they do affect our wellbeing. Industrial relations laws can damage or improve the quality of our working lives; government policies can protect the environment or see it defiled; our children's education depends on the quality of schools; tax policies can make the difference between a fair and an unfair society; and the cohesiveness of our communities is affected by city design and transport plans.

This manifesto proposes nine areas in which a government could and should enact policies to improve national wellbeing.

### 1. Provide fulfilling work

Fulfilling work is vital to our wellbeing; insecure, stressful and unsatisfying jobs diminish it. High-quality work can provide us with purpose, challenge and opportunities. Through it we can develop our capacities, begin to realise our potential, and meet many of our social needs. In short, fulfilling work is essential if we are to flourish. Workplaces that provide secure, rewarding jobs should be encouraged. Workplace flexibility, including quality part-time jobs, should operate in the interests of employees as well as employers.

Unemployment is more damaging than just the loss of income, and disparaging unemployed people serves only to increase their anxiety and sense of exclusion. Pursuing full employment is essential to a wellbeing economy, as is ensuring decent minimum workplace standards.

Satisfying work can be found inside and outside the home. Work in the household and in communities is essential to social health but it is ignored because it falls outside the official economy. Governments should value this work, and employers need to adapt to the realities of family life. Maternity leave, paternity leave, carers' leave and sick leave are not costs but essential to our wellbeing.

## **2. Reclaim our time**

Among the countries of the developed world, Australians now work the longest hours and have less holiday leave than most. We systematically overestimate the amount of wellbeing associated with high incomes and long work hours. As a result, our families, our health and our sense of achievement all suffer.

If Australia is to thrive, our working lives should contribute to, rather than sap, our wellbeing and that of our families. Spending more time with our families, friends and communities would make most of us happier, and our workplaces must be reshaped to allow us to reclaim our time.

To flourish as a nation—not just as an economy—we need to limit working hours by reducing the maximum working week to 35 hours initially and by more thereafter. Other developed countries have reduced working hours without the often-predicted chaos. If we took productivity gains in the form of a shorter working week rather than higher pay we could improve our quality of life and create new job opportunities, all without any reduction in pay.

## **3. Protect the environment**

A healthy, diverse natural environment is valuable in itself; it is also essential to human wellbeing. But government and

business tell us we cannot afford too much protection—it's bad for GDP. We know, though, that the wellbeing of future generations will be heavily affected if we fail resolutely to tackle biodiversity loss, pollution and waste. Climate change in particular poses a severe threat and demands immediate and far-reaching measures by government.

We can do much more than we have to date. We should increase taxes on damaging environmental activities such as burning fossil fuels and reduce taxes on socially beneficial activities such as providing fulfilling work. We should make the generation of waste very expensive and reward businesses and households that reduce their consumption and recycle materials.

## **4. Rethink education**

It is impossible for all students to come first in their class, and our education system should stop pretending they can. Our schools should be dedicated to creating capable, confident, emotionally mature young people who are equipped to face life's vicissitudes.

Young Australians are told they will have up to six careers in their lifetime, yet we insist on making high schools and universities more vocationally oriented. As a result, students learn less about themselves and the societies around them. A greater focus on children's physical, emotional and moral wellbeing—rather than competitive test results—would produce happier, healthier young people.

We should stop turning universities into businesses selling degrees and make them the critic and conscience of society, places where students flourish as humans and where academics feel free to question powerful institutions without fear of victimisation.

## **5. Invest in early childhood**

Studies show that, for each dollar wisely invested in early childhood education and care, we can save up to seven dollars in avoided costs of crime, unemployment,

remedial education and welfare payments. A wellbeing government would invest more.

Children need a great deal of individual attention in their early years. Shared parental leave should be extended to cover the first two years of a child's life. Parents, too, need support so they can do the best job for their children. Adolescence too is an important time; parents need to participate actively in the whole developmental journey.

#### **6. Discourage materialism and promote responsible advertising**

Buying a particular brand of margarine cannot give us a happy family, and owning a four-wheel drive will not deliver us from humdrum lives. But the advertisers seek to persuade us otherwise. Advertising makes us more materialistic, even though we know that people who are more materialistic are usually more self-absorbed, less community oriented and less happy. Materialism is also bad for the environment.

Marketers have hijacked the media and most of our cultural events, and it is impossible to escape their daily barrage. We need commercial-free zones in our cities and limits on shopping developments. And governments should use tax and retirement policies to help people who want to change to less materialistic lifestyles.

Advertisers prey especially on children because they know they lack the ability to distinguish between facts and advertising fiction. As in Sweden, advertising aimed at children under 12 should be banned, and advertising codes of conduct should be made legally binding so that irresponsible and deceptive marketing is outlawed.

#### **7. Build communities and relationships**

A flourishing society is characterised by vibrant, resilient and sustainable communities. Loneliness and isolation cause much unhappiness, especially

among single parents, unemployed people, older people living alone and people with disabilities and their carers.

Instead of criticising single parents who do the best they can, we should support them. Instead of judging people by their sexuality, we should encourage all loving and supportive relationships. And we need to help people develop the skills to build stronger family relationships.

We all depend on others for care at some time in our lives. Care is provided by parents, children, friends and others. We need to value all carers more.

Governments and employers should do much more to support workers with caring responsibilities.

Governments should also support participation in community organisations, especially among marginalised groups. Volunteers contribute greatly to our wellbeing and need to be recognised and rewarded.

#### **8. A fairer society**

Strong economic management will always be needed; but instead of a narrow focus on GDP growth, the objectives should include building public infrastructure and reducing social and regional inequalities. Widening disparities in incomes and access to services create resentment and disharmony.

Instead of blaming the victims, a wellbeing society would acknowledge that some people are left behind by the market. A fairer system of taxation and government spending—including better public services and income support for those less able to compete in the marketplace—would enhance social wellbeing.

More public funds could also go to overseas aid to help the poor in developing countries escape from poverty and destitution.

Increased public spending on measures to improve wellbeing in Australia could easily be financed by

cutting business and middle-class welfare and cracking down on tax avoidance.

## **9. Measure what matters**

Economic growth is treated as the panacea for our ills. But for affluent societies growth in GDP has almost no connection with improvements in national wellbeing. Bushfires, car accidents and crime waves all increase GDP, but they don't make us better off. GDP takes no account of how increases in income are distributed or the damage to the natural environment that economic activity can cause.

We need a set of national wellbeing accounts so that we can monitor our progress. They should report on the quality of work, the state of our communities, crime rates, our health, the strength of our relationships, and the state of the environment. Governments should be judged by how much our wellbeing improves, not by how much the economy expands.

## **Towards a flourishing society**

The question for Australia in the 21st century is not how we can become richer:

it is how we can use our high standard of living to build a flourishing society—one devoted to improving our wellbeing rather than just expanding the economy.

Many Australians are anxious about declining moral standards. We worry that we have become too selfish, materialistic and superficial and long for a society built on mutual respect, self-restraint and generosity of spirit.

The changes proposed in this manifesto would inspire healthier communities, stronger personal relationships, happier workplaces, a better balance between work and home, less commercialisation, and greater environmental protection.

A flourishing society is not a futile hope. Australian democracy offers people the opportunity to shed their cynicism and commit themselves to creating a better future.