

Happiness and well-being

The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, recently announced that from spring 2011 he wants to start measuring the British people's levels of happiness. 'I do believe that government has the power to improve well-being' he has said. The French and Canadian governments are also looking at how to put happiness at the heart of politics.

Cameron's announcement surprised many British people. Governments generally measure the success of a country simply through the economy. However, if a country is doing well economically, this does not necessarily mean that the people are happy. Cameron wishes to stop measuring people's happiness simply by their standard of living, but by their quality of life; not by how much money there is, but by people's actual level of contentment.

As a result, a 'happiness index' will be developed; the first results are to come out in 2012. Through surveys, large numbers of the British public are to be asked on a regular basis how they feel about such issues as education, health, the environment, and whether they are achieving their life goals. The results from the surveys can then be used when making government policies; they may also show if people's lives are improving or not.

How have the British people responded to the idea? Some have welcomed it, and others have laughed at it, seeing it as a waste of money. The problem is that measuring people's happiness may sound easy, but it is a very complicated thing to do.

In spite of the difficulties, one country already places happiness at the centre of its policy-making, and that is the Himalayan country of Bhutan. When the Bhutanese government makes a decision, it has to consider the effect of the policy on its people's happiness. Their prime minister recently said that even the dogs in Bhutan smile! 'Gross National Happiness' has been a goal of the government since 1978; their new king recently told the people 'Without peace, security and happiness we have nothing. That is the essence of the philosophy of Gross National Happiness'.

The Bhutanese are now hoping to build a Gross National Happiness centre in the forest in the Himalayan mountains. This tiny nation may be able to help other countries to put happiness at the heart of government policies. It is not going to be easy. After all, Greek philosophers such as Aristotle tried to identify happiness and its relationship with politics over 2000 years ago.

1 Before reading the text, decide how happy you are feeling on the scale of 1–5, where 1 is very unhappy and 5 is very happy.

- How are you feeling at this moment?
- How did you feel at this time yesterday?
- How did you feel yesterday overall?
- How are you feeling about this week as a whole?
- How do you rate your general level of happiness?

2 In pairs, try to define 'happiness', writing your definition in no more than 20 words.

3 Read and find out the following.

- 1 What do the British Prime Minister and some other governments hope to do?
- 2 How is this different from what happens normally?
- 3 Is this task going to be simple or difficult?

4 Answer the following questions.

- 1 Who has decided that surveys on happiness are going to be conducted from 2011?
- 2 Who examined happiness hundreds of years ago?
- 3 Who is going to build a centre for happiness?
- 4 Who smiles in Bhutan?
- 5 Who thinks the new government idea is a silly and expensive one?
- 6 Who has been giving attention to happiness for over 30 years?
- 7 Who said that 'standard of living' and 'quality of life' are not the same thing?

5 Discuss these points.

- 1 Do you think Britain, Bhutan, France and Canada are right – is it a government's role to consider people's happiness?
- 2 Does measuring the country's economy really tell us how its people are doing? Do you know people who are rich but not too happy?
- 3 The text says it is difficult to measure happiness. Can you think of some reasons why this might be?
- 4 Do you think Cameron's idea might work in your country or another country that you are familiar with? Why/Why not?
- 5 What things could a government do to ensure that its people are happy?

6 Categorise these common expressions, which all describe happiness or unhappiness. Circle the ones which refer to happiness and underline the ones referring to unhappiness.

- 1 You look *bright and breezy* this morning! Where are you going?
- 2 Someone *got out of the wrong side of the bed* this morning!
- 3 You look really *down in the dumps*. What's happened?
- 4 She's absolutely *over the moon* with the news.
- 5 Well, they're both *on cloud nine*, to be honest.
- 6 I'm *feeling a bit low*. Can we chat?
- 7 He's *as happy as Larry* at the moment, but I'm not sure why!

Glossary

announce (*verb*) - to make a public or official statement: *the company has announced a 26% increase in profits*

essence (*noun*) - the most important part of something, usually the part that gives it its general character

goal (*noun*) - something that you hope to achieve

policy (*noun*) - to a set of plans or actions agreed on by a government, political party, business or other group: *It is not the hospital's policy to reveal the names of patients*

standard of living (*noun*) - the type of life that a person or society has, according to the amount of money that they have: *Japan has a very high standard of living*

survey (*noun*) - a set of questions that you ask a large number of people or organizations

tiny (*adj*) - extremely small

well-being (*noun*) - the satisfactory state that someone or something should be in, that involves such things as being happy, safe and having enough money: *The company looks after the well-being of its employees*