



Rethinking Wellbeing Seminar Series

Different routes to enable greater wellbeing

Seminar Report

Wednesday 12 June 2013, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh

Introduction

- 1** This seminar set out to build on the three previous seminars that had looked at wellbeing from the perspectives of the environment, the economy and society. Taken as a whole, the series aims to challenge perceptions of wellbeing, and show the potential of thinking differently about the environment, economy and society for Scotland and its people.
- 2** This report summarises the main outcomes of this fourth seminar, which focussed on 'Different Routes to enable greater wellbeing'. The event was opened by Dr Aileen McLeod MSP, then Matthew Taylor gave the main presentation, followed by a Panel Session with Q&A and discussion. The audience included MSPs and their researchers, and other invited guests from a wide range of organisations and civic society in Scotland. Afterwards the Panel and Speakers were invited to a dinner and further discussion with MSPs.

Presentations

- 3** **Dr Aileen McLeod MSP** a Director of Scotland's Futures Forum, The Scottish Parliament, welcomed participants to this fourth seminar, and introduced the event. She emphasised that the complex problems we face are characterised by interdependencies; and that Government, Parliament and the public sector have an important enabling role in resolving these.
- 4** The previous three seminars had made clear that a holistic approach is vital, yet the fragmentation of Government and the public sector mitigates against this. There is a need to deal with this complexity, to have national accounts, and to guard against perverse outcomes: it is better to be roughly right than absolutely wrong. Our ecological and financial debt crises share the same roots, and in both we are living beyond our means. Economic growth is at best a means and not an end, has failed to address poverty and inequality. GDP is not a good measure of wellbeing. We all depend on ecosystem services which are critical for the wellbeing of communities.
- 5** The local dimension is important, as communities have resources and capacities which are not being mobilised. So too is language, the need to communicate in meaningful ways, and avoid the barrier of technocratic language (terms such as biodiversity or ecosystem services). Reinforcement is also needed: the consistency and coherence of performance frameworks, for example, and working to secure multiple benefits, tackling disadvantage and retaining the long view. Taking these into account, we have to find ways to deliver behaviour change, public services and devolved decision making:
- 6** She then introduced the speaker Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), and a former Chief Adviser on Political Strategy to the Prime Minister, and Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).
- 7** **Matthew Taylor** opened by saying that Scotland leads the way on thinking about wellbeing through its National Performance Framework and associated indicators, which have been commended by the Nobel Prize winning economist Professor Stiglitz. What is missing in the wellbeing debate is an important component: the attitude that people have to the society in which they live, and especially the degree of trust in society which people have, which has declined over the last two generations. This loss of faith in society is evident in the loss in trust of strangers, and the decline in congregational institutions such as the church, trade unions or political parties. In determining wellbeing, there is an urgent need to engage in a conversation about the kind of society people want to live in.

8 Matthew asked what are the characteristics of a good and healthy society that thrives, and suggested that to answer this requires identifying what drives power and change. Albeit they are generalisations, he suggested there are three main fundamental active forces that drive change in any society, and also posited a fourth:

- Hierarchy – leadership, and followership
- Individualism – people’s desires, appetites and ambition
- Solidarity – the things we do because we are part of a group.

Opposing all of these is the fourth – fatalism, that change is not possible, which he described as a kind of ‘anti-matter’, which perhaps stems from us being the only species aware we are going to die. We can trace these forces to our evolution and needs for survival as social animals.

9 Healthy, resilient and dynamic societies that have the greatest capacity to adapt have all three well balanced and acting together, recognising they are always in tension, and together keep fatalism at bay. However, usually these factors are at war with one another, and two of the three dominate:

- Public bodies are strong on hierarchy and solidarity, but weak on individualism
- Businesses are strong on hierarchy and individualism, but weak on solidarity (and lacking a meaningful mission).

The situation is even worse if only one force is active:

- Communes are strong on solidarity but weak on hierarchy and individualism; and they all collapse
- Banks before the credit crunch, were strong on individualism, but weak on hierarchy (a law to themselves) and solidarity (with no sense of social purpose).

10 He illustrated the tensions and imbalance using the example of climate change to show how the separate forces can generate differing responses:

- Hierarchy – results in the development of treaties and targets
- Individualism – feels the problem is not true or exaggerated; or looks to the markets and ingenuity to solve the problem
- Solidarity – advocates we need to stop flying overseas, and adopt alternative lifestyles
- Fatalism – concludes ‘we’re doomed’, or it is all untrue and put up by the establishment.

11 Matthew argued we need ‘clumsy’ solutions that do work, rather than elegant ones that don’t. Sometimes, too often, our actions are misguided. For example on Haiti after the earthquake, to combat malaria mosquito bed nets were given out for free. Many were then sold so people could buy food – partly because they didn’t believe that mosquitoes carry disease. This undermined the local market in nets, the price of which collapsed, ruining local businesses. So although well meant, by failing to think about individual motivations, the solution was elegant but disastrous, and the overall the situation was worse after the intervention.

- 12 Turning to Westminster politics and UK society, he argued that two of the forces are quite weak. Solidarity has become weakened and challenged in many ways, by the pace of life and diversity, and the changing role of women in society returning to work; and the fracturing of class. Hierarchy has yielded as we have become less deferential and not prepared to believe what we are told or to trust institutions, including politicians, the police, corporations, the banks or the BBC. Technology now gives more power to individuals through social media, Facebook and tweeting, than to companies. Individualism, and to an extent fatalism, have expanded to fill the voids, and policy solutions and interventions reflect this bias. For example, the current solution for social inequalities is to focus on individual advancement and social mobility, getting the more able to move from their communities, further intensifying inequalities for those who remain.
- 13 In reconnecting wellbeing with the kind of society people want, we need to renew hierarchy and to find leaders that we want to follow, which means a new type of leadership; renew forms of solidarity that work in a diverse fast moving world; and adopt a new definition of individualism which is less about acquiring and consuming, and more about creating, making and innovating.
- 14 We are more likely to be able to create 'clumsy' solutions at local level. It is also easier to forge new forms of solidarity at the local level, a bottom up approach, where there is closer appreciation of issues, where it is easier for communities to engage, and where local leaders enjoy stronger legitimacy for action. In this context, communities should be seen as assets – the richness of social networks and connections – not as bundles of needs, and we need to ask the community including family and friends on what the action should be – it works! RSA's 'whole person recovery' focuses on getting drug and alcohol addicts back into the community, establishing a recovery community, rather than normal service delivery which fails and rehabilitation unravels.
- 15 It is also at the local level that there are good prospects for leadership, in terms of legitimacy, innovation and delivering outcomes, i.e. getting stuff done. Matthew outlined two examples of leadership. When Labour made its commitment to abolish child poverty, it should have mobilised all three power sources. Instead it relied on Treasury, and generated no connection, ownership, or sense of agency, for the policy. It was an elegant solution, but was a glorious but heartbreaking failure of hierarchy. By contrast, the Republican Mayor of Oklahoma set out to tackle obesity with a campaign based on "I'm fat, we're fat, Oklahoma is a fat city, ... how about us losing a million pounds in weight." He took a huge risk, and had no plan for delivery. Yet nine months later by many different community activities, residents had lost 750,000 pounds. Only then, after people had bought into the idea that change was possible, did the Mayor then follow up by introducing sates taxes which then funded measures to make it easier for people, by improving infrastructure for cycling, etc. The key here is leadership which stems from giving people a sense of agency: a 'clumsy' solution which worked, by enhancing people's ability to make change happen.

- 16 To describe the wellbeing of a society we need a theory about what a good society comprises, how it works and where it gets its power. There is a massive social aspiration gap between the society people say they want to live in, versus the society we will create if we think and behave as we are now. We need to be able to re-orientate our actions so they line up with the kind of world and society which we want, something that doesn't figure in our current conversations about wellbeing.
- 17 In conclusion, Matthew summarised:
- > Clumsy problems need clumsy solutions: we ourselves need to change our norms and expectations
 - > We need to involve people, and we need to devise local solutions (as well as international and national action)
 - > Different places have potential to mobilise and do different things: this needs to be captured by 'experiments in living', for example with different places focusing on the arts, or the environment, or tackling child poverty

We need social optimism to bring this about, and for our actions to be based on hope, not on the basis that hope leads to action, but that action leads to hope – enabling people to act not just on their own behalf but also on behalf of wider society.

Discussion

- 18 The members of the discussion Panel, chaired by Tim Birley, comprised **Matthew Taylor**, together with **Professor Jan Webb**, University of Edinburgh, and **Claudia Beamish MSP** and **Patrick Harvie MSP**. They were asked about the relevance of these ideas to an area such as Drumchapel. What professionals may call a 'deprived area' is 'home' to the people who live there, and therefore language is important. That said, the need is to see communities as assets and not as bundles of needs, which has grown out of a bureaucratic paternalistic model. Regeneration projects ignore existing networks and seek, wittingly or unwittingly, to establish new ones, which doesn't work. Asking 'deprived' families to help other 'deprived' families, can show the power of what can happen when someone is asked to do something they have never been asked to do before. Other forces work against valuing solidarity and community assets include advertising which works powerfully to manipulate and promote individualistic values in the interests of business, advocating that status depends on consuming.
- 19 Asked about the role of the church, panel members thought it has the potential to be an important element of solidarity. Much depends on what the church or religion does, or what people do in its name. It can be and often is a powerful force for good but sometimes, as in the case of extremism, a powerful force for bad in terms of sectarianism or racism. The evidence is that people of a religious persuasion enjoy a greater sense of wellbeing, but the church too has problems of hierarchy, and sometimes actions can be well-meaning but paternalistic that backfire (e.g. the Haiti mosquito net example).

- 20** In discussion about the ‘antimatter’ of fatalism, and whether it destroys hope and how it relates to action, two main points were made. First, clearly both hope and action are needed, but action can often be the right starting point. Second, the myth of low aspirations in working class communities has to be dispelled; the problems are low expectations due to a lack of efficacy and agency. UK governance being highly centralised exacerbates this lack of agency, with devolved administrations at all levels acting as delivery arms of a centralised state. We engineer our fatalism and loss of hope by the kinds of consumerism and individualistic competitiveness that has been put in place by the political system over the last 30 years. Over this period income inequality and inequality of ownership has widened for structural reasons, and this engenders fatalism – a sense that there is little the individual can do to change this. We must not succumb to this fatalism.
- 21** The panel were asked if differences in rural and urban settings call for different approaches to leadership, and capacity building in different types of settlement. Discussion again focussed on the importance of agency. An illustration was that the community on Gigha had believed in their potential having visited Eigg and taking confidence from that. However, small positive steps are countered by massive structural problems. Changes in ownership can be transformational for communities, and private ownership of assets that impact on communities, such as land, raise questions about individualism and solidarity, and need to come back onto the agenda. Cities are very diverse, and ownership fragmented and diverse, whereas small rural communities can be more coherent. Place making must involve a ‘top-down’ element as well as ‘bottom-up’ when society is so unequal, otherwise purely local initiatives could favour more ‘able’ communities and intensify inequalities. It is also the wrong time to be reforming the planning system by replacing the aim of sustainable development by economic growth.
- 22** The Scottish Parliamentary committees ought to hold the Scottish Government to account. This was the commitment when the Parliament was set up as a single chamber sharing power with the people, yet the Committees are caught up in processes rather than outcomes: they are not addressing the big issues of society. For example, all Committees are required to look at sustainable development, but have taken a laissez faire approach, with no clear leadership or sense of how to make sure the right questions are asked. They have developed specialised and reactive agendas that are not very outcome focused, which can be extremely frustrating for members, with no way of addressing joined-up or generic issues such as preventative spend, inequalities or food vulnerability, or even to scrutinise the budget. Thinking about Parliamentary procedures has become a bit stale; the referendum currently dominates business, and after it takes place there needs to be a debate about how the Parliament recaptures the original participatory spirit.
- 23** At the same time we do not yet have a Scottish story (like the Mayor of Oklahoma’s story) that is powerful enough for everyone to get behind it. The economic growth story is yesterday’s story; there is an opportunity to create a new Scottish story setting out why we need to change the way we are living. What is the alternative script – is this a role for the Parliament? The Oxfam contribution to our seminar series has given at least part of the answer about what matters to people. The fable of the tortoise and hare is also relevant: slower living – the tortoise – gets there faster in the end. However, the answer depends on what you ask and how you ask it. Often people say they want Scandinavian public services on US taxes: this is just not feasible. Good politics has a psycho-dynamic element – the ability to change the discourse and people’s minds, and at the same time giving them agency. And as things change, there has to be a capacity to adapt.

- 24 There is a misalignment of much of what is done in our name which does not fit with what we want. This may explain a lot of the angst. Actions need local engagement. Hierarchies are failing in part because of technology, which is leading to their behaviours being exposed. They need to have to behave in a way that is more transparent, as if they are in a glass box, if the current lack of trust is to be restored. Without trust the relationship can be corrosive.
- 25 We appear to be creating a world that none of us individually want, which relates to the social aspiration gap to which Matthew Taylor referred. Rather than focus on individual happiness, we should also look to social engagement. The evidence is that people who volunteer are happier; those involved in politics are not. There is a breakdown of institutions. Political parties started as organisations for making change, but they are no longer; trades unions spend much time defending people who do jobs badly, rather than supporting those who want to do a good job.
- 26 That story has also to square with localism, doing things differently in different places, and move away from a delivery model. The civil service tends to propose that there is one best way for doing most things, but if there are many ways to do things (and there usually are), then you should allow them to happen. Over-centralisation is a big problem, the scope for discretion and judgement in the public sector has been much reduced.
- 27 There is no reason why organisations such as SEPA, SNH or Oxfam, which have both responsibilities and privilege, could not function like Matthew's 'mayor', i.e. a local leader. Everyone of us can be that 'mayor' – we all have power and influence in our organisations.
- 28 The current model of governance also encourages short termism. Even if the Humankind Index tells us that minor things, such as potholes, are not what matter to people, Governments need to do the small stuff, such as fixing the potholes in the road. If they do not, people do not believe that are competent and don't have confidence (in terms of hierarchy) in their ability to tackle bigger issues.
- 29 Summing up, Matthew felt it is worth looking at the transformational role of mayors in US cities, and attributed this to leaders engaging directly with their populations. Mayors across the world are more popular than prime ministers or presidents. Cities are also cooperating internationally on environmental matters such as climate change. He argued that all three forces – hierarchy, solidarity and individualism – are where change comes from in society and have to be mobilised, recognising that they are always in tension. We should also beware of a tone amongst progressives of suspicion towards individualism and ambition. There is a massive growth amongst the young to be entrepreneurial, not in the Apprentice sense, but balanced in terms of creativity, often social and creative businesses, and we should foster this. He also suggested that the 2012 Olympics might be seen as evidence of where the three factors worked in balance and there was a sense of collective belief. Government realised that it could not micro-manage so mandated the organisation to just get on with it – so a strong hierarchy. Individualism is the spirit of the games. Solidarity was in abundant evidence through the 'Games Makers' – the hordes of volunteers. Everyone had got caught up in the positive mood, and the Olympics showed what is possible.

- 30 In a session fired up by a presentation delivered with great intellectual dexterity, wit and panache, several key messages came through. The event deepened the debate and emphasised the importance of agency and empowerment, for individuals, communities and politicians. We also need to show wellbeing is 'better', to get to the kind of future society which many people want, rather than what we currently experience and appear to be heading for. One of the panel members, Claudia Beamish MSP has summed it up succinctly:

Speaking on the foundations of a successful society, Matthew identified four pillars: hierarchy, solidarity, individualism, and the so-called 'antimatter' of fatalism. He argues that the first three must all be present in order for any societal body – be it economic or political – to be sustainable, while keeping the pessimism of the latter in check.

... Human complexity requires more of an all-encompassing approach if we are to meet today's problems with any hope of sustainable success. Whilst platforms such as Scottish Government's National Performance Framework and 'Scotland Performs' broaden the scope of our hierarchy, our civic solidarity and enterprising individualism must be further fostered. We should strive to encourage the longevity of a holistic style of 'good governance' in the political discourse.

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