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Comment

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When I was a child, my parents took me to the 1964 World's Fair in Queens, New York. My strongest memories of that event—before the Vietnam War, Watergate and other controversies took some of the shine off modernism—involved the focus on the rapidly developing science and technology, and how that would affect our quality of life. The central theme of the World's Fair was that the most pressing social problem in Western countries in the early 21st century would be how to manage the abundance of leisure time.

If anything, most of the projections about the advances in science and technology were too conservative. While applied robotics still has a way to go (as evidenced by a visit last year to the most recent World's Fair in Nagoya, Japan) and space travel is still far from routine—and motor vehicles still burn petrol and utilising public transport is often a trial—personal computers are vastly more powerful, affordable and user-friendly than was projected; mobile phones and other electronic devices are ubiquitous; and the human genome has been fully sequenced.

Exactly as projected 40 years ago, the average middle class home in any developed country contains a large range of electronic appliances, such as microwaves, dishwashers, washing machines, plasma televisions with associated digital recording devices, digital telephones, home computers, and even 'smart' refrigerators.

Yet all of the evidence suggests that, contrary to an over-abundance of leisure time, most people feel like they are working longer and harder than ever—and with that, we see more uncertainty and anxiety about the security and rewards of employment; increasing levels of stress and mental illness; and high levels of family breakdown.

In a recent survey[1] commissioned by Families Australia—a peak association of NGOs concerned with family affairs—nearly 70 per cent of respondents stated that, compared with five years ago, it is more difficult to achieve a satisfactory 'work-life balance', and thus 'people have less time for family and friends'. Most poignantly, parents of older children reported that the single most important thing they would do differently would be to spend more time with their children, and young people aged 12-18 said the most important thing they wanted from their parents is time.

Although Australians like to think of themselves as great travellers and world class partiers, an April 2006 survey by a travel company comparing annual leave trends in France, Germany, Great Britain, Australia, Canada and the United States found that Australians came second last (to the US) in accruing annual leave—and dead last in actually taking time off. Over one-third of Australians fail to utilise their annual leave entitlements, leaving an incredible stockpile of 70 million days—prompting Travel Australia to commence a 'No leave, no life' campaign.[2]

Lord Richard Layard and Professor Daniel Kahneman (a Nobel Laureate in behavioural economics) have argued that the 'stagnancy of

happiness' in modern societies should prompt policymakers to shift their priorities from the creation of wealth to the creation of good feelings, from boosting gross national product to increasing gross national happiness. Elsewhere in this issue of *Reform*, Dr Clive Hamilton provides an elegant essay on the social malaise of 'affluenza'.

These issues and concerns begin to arise in societies from the point that individuals are no longer totally occupied with ensuring the bare necessities and have the time to wonder 'is that all there is?' In his autobiography, the 19th century English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill—whose name is virtually synonymous with the modern liberal, market-based economy—wrote that:

> 'Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way'.[3]

Contemporary research suggests that cause and effect regarding happiness is often confused, recalling Sri Chinmoy's simple, but sage, advice: 'Don't worry. Be happy'. A literature review conducted by a team at the University of California, Riverside (UCR), makes a compelling case that happiness leads to success in work, relationships and health, rather than the other way around.

> A recent review of all the available literature has revealed that happiness does indeed have numerous positive by-products, which appear to benefit not only individuals, but families, communities, and the society at large. The benefits of happiness include higher income and superior work outcomes (eg, greater productivity and higher quality of work), larger social rewards (eg, more satisfying and longer marriages, more friends, stronger social support and richer social interactions), more activity, energy, and flow, and better physical health (eg, a bolstered immune system, lowered stress levels and less pain) and even longer life. The literature also suggests that happy individuals are more creative, helpful, charitable, and self-confident, have better self-control, and show greater self-regulatory and coping abilities.[4]

All of which may suggest that the contemporary focus on 'work-life balance' is somewhat miscast—as if 'work' is to be endured, 'life' is to be enjoyed, and never the twain shall meet. However, it has never been more true in Western societies that work is a central part of life, going well beyond providing the means to acquire basic necessities, to encompass important matters of intellectual stimulation, social networks, feelings of social worth and the construction of identity.

Law reformers have the opportunity, not presented so obviously to many others, to work towards the improvement of society, as Mill recommends. And, according to the UCR researchers and others, our work will be more efficient and of higher quality if we are happy when we are doing it.

This 'virtuous circle' should not be too hard for us to achieve. As I said at my welcome morning tea at the ALRC seven years ago, 'if law reform can't be fun, then there is no hope for the rest of the world'.

Endnotes

1. Adele Horin, 'What the World Needs Now is--Time', 17 May 2006, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/what-the-world-needs-now-is--time/2006/05/16/1147545326461.html>.
2. 'Aussies Deprived of Holidays', 24 May 2006, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Aussies-deprived-of-holidays/2006/05/24/1148150312810.html>.
3. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), ch 5.
4. See <http://www.faculty.ucr.edu/~sonja/index.html> at 15 May 2006.