eep in the Himalayas, wedged between India and China, sits the tiny Buddhist nation of Bhutan, a land marked by tall mountains, deep forests, and glacier-fed rivers and streams. All but inaccessible to foreign visitors, Bhutan was virtually unknown to the outside world until the 1960s. Its poverty, illiteracy, and infant mortality ranked among the worst of all nations. In 1972, however, something unusual happened in this remote country that caught the attention of people around the globe. A new king, Jigme Singye Wanchuk, declared that from this point forward "Gross National Happiness" rather than Gross National Product would be his nation's principal yardstick for measuring progress. Speaking of Bhutan's five-year development plans, he declared: "If, at the end of the plan period, our people are not happier than they were before, we should know that our plans have failed."

The details of Bhutan's new policy are not yet fully worked out, but the following "Four Pillars" of Gross National Happiness summarize the main components.<sup>2</sup>

Good governance and democratization: Although the people of Bhutan seemed more than pleased with their ruler, King Wanchuk concluded that democracy offered the surest guarantee of happiness over the long run. Against considerable opposition from his subjects, the popular monarch gradually moved his country toward democracy by insisting on shedding his royal powers in favor of an elected assembly, an executive council of ministers chosen by the assembly, and a separate system of courts. His son, who has

now succeeded him, seems determined to continue the process of democratization. Under the current king's leadership, Bhutan introduced a new constitution and held its first national election in 2008 to choose the members of its legislature.

Stable and equitable socioeconomic development: Economic growth is actively encouraged, since many Bhutanese are still very poor. But the government has deliberately refrained from maximizing immediate growth in order to maintain a slower, steadier expansion over the long run. Officials believe that the fruits of this development should be shared equitably. While the exact meaning of this principle remains unclear, it has already meant free and universal education (through the ninth grade, as of now) and free medical care for all.

Environmental protection: Economic growth has been repeatedly sacrificed to allow a series of restrictions to protect the environment and preserve its natural beauty for future generations. For example, tourism is strictly limited, plastic bags are officially forbidden, to-bacco trade is prohibited (though compliance is far from perfect), and tax incentives and reduced import duties have been used to favor eco-friendly products and technologies. To prevent deforestation, the government has promoted electric stoves, set aside vast areas as national parks, and decreed that a minimum of 60 percent of Bhutan's total land area must be reserved for forests.

*Preservation of culture*: The government not only seeks to retain distinctive elements of Bhutan's traditional culture but also tries to promote such values as voluntarism and service to others, tolerance, cooperation, and a harmonious balance between family, work, and leisure.

Rather than leave these objectives in the form of general guiding principles, government officials have now produced 72 indicators for measuring progress, and the central government has been reorganized to ensure that all policies are designed with these indicators in mind. Much progress has already occurred. Gross per capita income now substantially exceeds that of India, average life expectancy has risen from 43 years in 1982 to 66 years today, and infant mortality has fallen from 163 deaths per 100,000 births to 40. New schools and clinics have sprung up throughout the

country, and literacy has increased from 10 percent in 1982 to 66 percent at present. According to the latest World Bank Survey, the quality of governance does not yet approach the standards of most Western nations, but it has improved steadily and now ranks well above that of India and China, and far above that of Nepal.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding these accomplishments, all is not perfect in Bhutan by any means. Different goals sometimes conflict with one another, requiring difficult trade-offs. In order to promote objectives of health, environment, and equity, the government has chosen to restrict individual freedom by such measures as prohibitions on smoking and private medical practice along with compulsory dress codes and strict architectural requirements for the design of new buildings. Despite the government's desire to preserve Bhutan's Buddhist culture, the introduction of television and the Internet poses a threat to traditional values. As young people leave the countryside for the excitement of the city, unemployment in the capital is high, theft is rising, and drug use is said to be a growing problem.

Even more troubling has been the treatment of the substantial Nepalese minority.<sup>4</sup> In the name of cultural unity, the government imposed regulations on dress in the 1980s and banned the teaching of Nepalese in schools. When angry protests ensued, more than 100,000 Nepalese were forced to leave the country and now live in refugee camps in Nepal. Those who remain are supposed to have papers to prove their citizenship, no easy matter in a country where illiteracy is still common and documentation often spotty. Anyone who cannot supply the necessary proof is barred from obtaining a business license, attending college, or working in the government. Apparently, then, despite the goals of tolerance and equity, some people are more equal than others, presumably at considerable cost to the latter's happiness.

All in all, however, the record of Bhutan remains impressive.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not one agrees with every policy decision of the government, the progress to date appears to be substantial, and the seriousness of the enterprise is undeniable. The sheer utopian audacity of a country that commits itself to making happiness the centerpiece of national policy is enough to compel a respectful interest.

Bhutan is still the only nation to formally adopt the people's happiness as its principal goal, but the idea has begun to capture the attention of other governments as well. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France has announced an initiative to measure well-being throughout the country as a result of evidence that French people are experiencing increasing difficulty in their daily lives. In Britain, the prime minister's strategy unit has prepared a study paper on the implications of happiness research for public policy, while David Cameron, Britain's Conservative Party leader, has declared that "we should be thinking not just about what is good for putting money in people's pockets but what is good for putting joy in people's hearts." Britain, China, and Australia are all considering the use of official happiness indexes in addition to the conventional economic measures of prosperity and growth.

What accounts for this recent upsurge of interest? After all, instituting happiness as a national goal is not a new idea. In fact, the idea of happiness as a goal of public policy reached its high watermark in the eighteenth century. A whole series of political theorists—Cesare Beccaria, Claude-Adrien Helvétius, and Francis Hutcheson, among others—proposed the promotion of happiness and the avoidance of pain as the proper aim of personal and public morality. The French Constitution of June 24, 1793, even declared: "Le but de la société est le bonheur commun" (The goal of society is general happiness). In the United States, Jefferson famously included the pursuit of happiness in the Declaration of Independence, and more than half the states inserted the phrase in their constitutions.

One writer, Jeremy Bentham, gained enduring fame through his pronouncement that the overriding aim of government should be to secure the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people by maximizing pleasures and minimizing pain.<sup>10</sup> In his more optimistic passages, he wrote about a science of happiness, a "felicific calculus" by which governments could measure the expected pleasures and pains resulting from policy proposals and choose the one that would produce the greatest net happiness.<sup>11</sup>

Bentham's dream of a science of happiness attracted much interest at the time and still finds a place in any anthology of political

theory. He remains a key figure in the rise of utilitarianism with its familiar tools of policy-making such as cost-benefit analysis. Yet his hope of reducing policy-making to a process of mathematical calculation soon came to naught. Neither he nor his supporters could explain how to measure the intensity and duration of pleasures and pains let alone how to aggregate the myriad sensations experienced by millions of citizens in order to determine the net effect of legislative proposals. As a result, his felicific calculus remained for many decades a subject suitable only for abstract discussions by political scientists and philosophers and their students.

In the last 35 years, however, psychologists and economists in growing numbers have tried to overcome the problems of measuring happiness by the simple device of asking people directly how pleasant or disagreeable they find particular activities throughout their day or by inquiring how satisfied ("very," "fairly," "not at all," etc.) they are overall with the lives they are leading. 12 By analyzing the answers, investigators have arrived at a number of conclusions about which activities and experiences contribute to feelings of happiness or unhappiness and which are most responsible for the differences among people in the satisfaction they feel about their lives.

Among these findings, four are especially thought-provoking, since they depart in intriguing ways from conventional wisdom. The first conclusion, reported by economist Richard Easterlin and several other investigators here and abroad, is that average levels of happiness in the United States have risen very little if at all over the past 50 years despite substantial growth in per capita incomes.<sup>13</sup> Although rich people, as a whole, are happier than poor people and average levels of well-being are almost invariably higher in wealthy nations than in poorer countries, the percentages of Americans who declare themselves "very happy," "pretty happy," or "not too happy" are almost exactly the same as they were half a century ago.

The second discovery of psychologists (including the Nobel Prize-winning Daniel Kahneman) is that people are often surprisingly bad judges of what will make them happy.<sup>14</sup> In particular, they seem unable to predict the duration of the happiness or unhappiness brought on by many common events or changes in their

lives. Instead, they attach too much importance to the immediate effects of a happy or unhappy experience without realizing how quickly they will adapt and grow used to what has occurred. Thus, they move to California for the weather only to find themselves no happier than they were before. They buy an attractive new car but cease to experience any added satisfaction after a few weeks. When asked what would make the greatest positive difference in their lives, Americans are likely to reply: "more money." As previously noted, however, decades of increasing prosperity do not seem to have made people happier. Instead, Americans seem to be stuck on a hedonic treadmill. As incomes rise, people soon grow used to their higher standard of living and feel they need even more money to lead a good life.<sup>15</sup>

The third finding, by Professors Alberto Alesina, Rafael Di Tella, and Robert MacCulloch, is that the growing inequality of incomes in the United States over the past 35 years has not made Americans more dissatisfied. Those with below-average incomes, who would presumably be most adversely affected, turn out to be no less content with their lot than they were several decades earlier when incomes were more evenly distributed. The only identifiable group of people who seem perceptibly upset by increasing inequality are well-to-do Americans. These conclusions have gained support from a Dutch scholar, Ruut Veenhoven, who has studied differences in happiness between richer and poorer citizens in Western countries. By his calculations, *rising inequality of incomes* in several of the advanced economies of North America and Western Europe has been accompanied by a slight but perceptible *narrowing of national differences in happiness*.<sup>17</sup>

Veenhoven has also studied government efforts to help working-class families and other vulnerable groups and has arrived at a fourth unexpected result. In a provocative study of the effects of social welfare programs—including public pensions, health care systems, and unemployment insurance—Veenhoven found no correlation between the percentage of gross national income that governments devoted to such purposes and the happiness or health or longevity of the populations involved.<sup>18</sup> True, some of the most generous welfare states, such as Sweden and Denmark, are among

the happiest countries in the world, but so are Iceland and Switzerland, where the percentage of national income devoted to welfare programs is only one-third as large.

In one respect, Veenhoven's findings should be reassuring to persons of all political persuasions. If happiness in the United States were distributed as unequally as incomes, the country might have been consumed long since by seething social unrest. Still, his conclusions on the effects of social legislation must be discomfiting to liberals who have fought for years for redistributive programs that would help the sick and needy. Although conservatives have long maintained that social legislation often fails to help its intended beneficiaries, Veenhoven himself is no conservative. Instead, he declares himself a scholar of liberal leanings who undertook his studies expecting to demonstrate the human costs of cutting back European welfare programs in order to compete in a global economy.

Findings such as those just described raise questions about several widely held beliefs with respect to the proper goals and priorities of government. If happiness has changed so little over decades of increasing prosperity, does it make much sense for public officials to attach such importance to economic growth as a measure of the nation's progress? If people are such poor judges of what will give them lasting satisfaction, should conservatives continue to extol the virtues of free markets and consumer choice in promoting the welfare of the population? At the same time, if poor Americans are undisturbed by the growth of inequality in recent years, should liberals worry so much about the distribution of income in America and press so strongly for progressive taxes and expensive government programs to benefit the sick, the needy, and the unemployed?

Before we cast aside the conventional wisdom, however, and start looking to happiness scholars for guidance, we need to think seriously about several questions:

- What, exactly, have these investigators discovered?
- How valid and reliable are their findings? How do they make their measurements and how do we know they are accurate?
- Even if psychologists can measure the happiness of a population accurately and identify the conditions of life that affect it, should

lawmakers pay attention to such findings if they run counter to what most voters *think* they want?

- Is happiness too private, too self-indulgent, too insubstantial a condition to be a suitable goal for an entire nation or society? If it *is* an appropriate goal, should it be the *only* guide to public policy, as Bentham claimed, or are there other objectives that political leaders should pursue?
- And finally, if lawmakers did decide to pay heed to the emerging knowledge about happiness, what changes in public policy might one expect as a result?

The pages that follow attempt to answer these questions.