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Out of the Slough of happiness

By Richard W. Rahn

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Slough (meaning muddy field), England, is not a lovely place. It is east of London, a bit beyond Heathrow Airport -- a glum commuter town. The BBC, in a made-for-television social experiment, "Making Slough Happy," is trying to make Slough a happier place by giving the town group therapy, bizarre as that may seem.

I am all for happiness (mine and others), but this experiment prompts a number of questions. Do we know what happiness is and can we measure it? Is it proper for a government institution (the BBC, in this case) to spend money coerced from one taxpayer (which may make him or her unhappy) to make another citizen "happy"?

The project's lead psychologist, Richard Stevens, claims he has figured out how to make people happy. He says if you exercise a half-hour three times weekly, count your blessings (at least five times a day), plant something and keep it alive, phone a friend, have an hourlong uninterrupted talk with your closest friend each week, have a good laugh every day, speak to and smile at strangers, cut television watching in half, give yourself a treat and do an act of kindness every day, you will be happy. These seem like nice activities and certainly unlikely to do any harm, but for many people "happiness" is not so simple.

The U.S. Declaration of Independence has the wonderful phrase that all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Notice we do not have a right to happiness, only the right to pursue it.

Subsequently, the Declaration states that if a government becomes "destructive to these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it." Given these statements of the American Founding Fathers, it is interesting to ask how nations rank in terms of "happiness."

Scholars at the Netherlands' Erasmus University in Rotterdam have created "The World Data Base on Happiness." They freely admit their work is far from perfect. But they have spent years working on the methodology, and their numbers are probably as good as any. They have created a scale from 0 to 10 as to how much people enjoy life as a whole. Those nations scoring 7 or higher are almost all highly developed rich nations, including the U.S. and U.K. Switzerland and Denmark top the list with scores of 8.2, and it is no coincidence they both also rank very high on the indices of economic freedom. France

had a slightly lower score (6.6) than most wealthy countries, which could indicate working less does not bring happiness. Those with lower scores were mostly part poor and less free nations.

However, there were some surprises. For instance, Latvia (4.7) and Lithuania (4.7) had lower-than-expected scores, given their respective income and freedom levels.

It is a fair generalization that one way for people to be happier is for their government to adopt pro-growth policies to raise real incomes and widen economic opportunity. Given this, it is unlikely the group therapy experiment in Slough will have long-lasting effects. Slough has a significantly higher percentage of depressing public housing blocks (i.e., less owner-occupied housing) than the British average and a faster-rising crime rate, both of which are likely to make people "less happy."

Perhaps if the government concentrated on privatizing housing, reducing crime and let the private sector produce a less dreary environment, Slough would be "happier."

Other studies, such as some by Professor Martin Seligman, show optimists are much happier, more successful and live longer (19 percent, in one study) than pessimists. As one who has spent much time in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, I quickly noticed how much more pessimistic a majority of the people there seem when compared with Americans. The empirical evidence supports these casual observations, not surprising considering the different national histories.

It is certainly helpful for government leaders, commentators and other opinionmakers to give upbeat reports when justified, and for psychologists, religious leaders and others to preach positive, self-help messages. But government can do many concrete things to make it easier for more of citizens to be happy: Let them be as free as possible. We know economic freedom correlates highly with individual liberty and economic growth and opportunity. We know high taxes and regulation reduce opportunity and people's control of their own lives.

It is interesting that the most satisfied people live in the small states of Switzerland and Denmark, where government is close, less repressive and highly responsive. Perhaps a world of smaller government units would make us freer *and* happier.

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