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Increasingly uncomfortable living in a material world

*Optimism about quality of life has slumped among Australians, writes **Richard Eckersley**.*

Making the cover of *Time* or *Newsweek* has long been a milestone in public recognition - for issues and people. In one cover story, 'The ravaged environment', *Newsweek* warns of the peril to humanity posed by the destruction of the natural environment. The general public, it states, 'has been seized with such anger and alarm as to goad political leaders into proclaiming conservation of the environment the chief task of this decade'.

The magazine quotes the head of General Motors as committing his company to eliminating cars as a source of pollution, even if it means abandoning the petrol engine itself. The President of the United States declares this must be the decade 'when America pays its debt to the past by reclaiming the purity of its air, its water and our living environment. It is literally now or never.'

It sounds encouraging – except for the date on the magazine's cover: 26 January 1970.

In the decades since these proclamations, we've made gains environmentally, mainly local, but the global task has continued to grow and grow. *Newsweek* makes passing mention of global warming – or the greenhouse effect, as it was called then - describing it as one of the 'fanciful notions' of global disaster that scientists played with in 'their more apocalyptic moments'.

Well, yesterday's 'fanciful notion' has become today's alarming fact. As Dean Collins, of the Bureau of Meteorology's National Climate Centre, said in the wake of the bureau's announcement that 2005 was Australia's hottest year on record: 'Climate change is here, and it's real.'

Governments – notably those of Australia and the United States - have been slow to accept this reality because they fear seriously tackling global warming will jeopardise economic growth, and growth, they believe, is the foundation of progress, of making life better. The primacy of growth is at the heart of the concept of material progress, which regards growth as paramount because it creates the wealth necessary not only to increase personal freedoms and opportunities, but also to meet community needs and national goals, including addressing social problems.

However, material progress is an increasingly dysfunctional idea, based on an outdated industrial metaphor of progress as a pipeline: pump more wealth in one end and more welfare flows out the other. It is facing a growing challenge from a competing notion, sustainable development, which does not accord economic growth overriding priority.

Instead, it seeks a better balance and integration of social, environmental and economic goals and objectives to produce a high, equitable and enduring quality of life.

A common theme is the perceived need to shift from *quantity* to *quality* in our way of life and our measurements. Rather than casting the core question in terms of being pro-growth or anti-growth, we need to see that growth itself is not the main game.

Government are lagging far behind both scientific evidence and public opinion on this shift in worldviews or frames of reference. The 2005 Ipsos Mackay report on the mind and mood of Australians says we feel we 'seem to lurching from one difficulty to another with the prospect of a serious crisis emerging'. The blame is repeatedly directed at political leaders, who are accused of 'short-term thinking' and neglecting to invest in the country's future.

An Ipsos Mackay survey last November, which included questions asked in 1988 and 1995 studies that I was associated with, provides striking evidence of the extent to which economic performance and people's perceptions and preferences are diverging. Despite a decade-and-a-half-long economic boom that has seen sustained, strong economic growth, declining unemployment, low interest rates and rising incomes, the proportion of Australians saying quality life in about 15 years' time would be better fell from 30 per cent in 1988 to 23 per cent in 2005; the proportion that said it would worse rose from 40 to 46 per cent.

Offered two positive scenarios of Australia's future - one focused on individual wealth, economic growth and efficiency and enjoying 'the good life', the other on community, family, equality and environmental sustainability - 73 per cent expected the former, but 93 per cent preferred the latter. This gap between expectations and preferences has widened markedly since 1995. Optimism about the future of world has slumped. Asked to choose between two statements about the world in the 21st century, only 23 per cent thought it was likely to be 'a new age of peace and prosperity'; 66 per cent opted for 'a bad time of crisis and trouble'.

In other words, we are seeing a profound loss of faith in a future constructed around notions of material progress, economic growth and scientific and technological fixes to the challenges we face. We no longer believe in the 'official story' of the future on which our governments base their policies. Environmentalists and scientists have won the minds of the public. Now they need to win our hearts, to give us the courage to act on our convictions.

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