

YOU CAN'T BUY HAPPINESS

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It makes perfect sense, but will it ever fly? There's a movement afoot to get governments to decide policy based on happiness, rather than the economy.

For decades, economists have been measuring success according to the size of the Gross National Product. The logic of that would seem to be: The richer you are, the happier you are.

There are at least two problems with that. One is that, since wealth is unevenly distributed, great numbers still live in squalour. The other is, money can't buy happiness.

The second International Conference on Gross National Happiness was held in Antigonish, N.S., last week.

"The conventional paradigm that bases progress just on economic growth alone is not satisfactory," says Ron Colman of GPI Atlantic, a non-profit research group in Nova Scotia.

"It's too narrow, so we know we have to assess our progress in a more comprehensive and accurate way."

Gross national happiness doesn't measure happiness directly — that's probably impossible. What it does factor in are environmental preservation, sustainable economic development, cultural promotion and good governance.

For too many years, it's seemed to be almost a knee-jerk reaction for governments to mouth platitudes about quality of life and the environment, while doing the minimum for them. Environmental awareness is gradually nudging government policies in many countries around the world, but progress is painfully slow.

Doesn't it make simple sense that people simply want good lives for themselves and that the economy should serve that end, rather than our lives serving the economy? Thomas Jefferson incorporated a similar thought in America's founding document, the Declaration of Independence, with the felicitous phrase, ". . . life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The tiny Asian country of Bhutan played host to the first international happiness conference last year. It was in Bhutan where the concept originated more than 30 years ago. The king of Bhutan decreed that gross national happiness should supersede the gross national product.

"We're bringing all these people together to try to say, 'What would a sane, decent, good society look like when you put all of these parts together?' " Colman said.

Our values govern our lives. Happiness, surely, is a better value than greed. **KEYWORDS=FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**