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# Baggs Memorial Happiness Lecture 2011

Alastair Campbell delivers the Baggs Memorial Lecture on the subject of Happiness in the University's Great Hall.

## Title - **Baggs Memorial Lecture 2011 (/events/baggs/2011.aspx)**

Speakers - Alastair Campbell

### Transcript begins

I must say this does not feel like the neatest fit in the world. Me and happiness. Fiona's response on my telling her I had been asked to make this speech on happiness … 'why on earth are they asking you?' My daughter … yeah right. Philip Gould just laughed out loud … he it is who in his book described going on holiday with me and Fiona as being a bit like a series of day trips with the Glums.

You have had Richard Wilson as a previous speaker. I know him well through his support for the Labour Party. I must warn you I am more Victor Meldrew than Richard Wilson.

So there are two obvious ways to come at a speech like this.

The personal – am I happy? Ask the question and use the answer to explain what I mean by happiness. And the political/professional … can politics deliver happiness, and should it try?

And at the heart of that question there is a lot of interesting stuff going on. David Cameron has added happiness, or general well-being, to the factors that policy makers should include when analysing policy. Currently ministers are asked to take account of economic, social and environmental impact, as well as the effect on gender and racial equality. Now happiness is to be added to that.

I don't have a problem with that. I don't believe governments can make people happy in the way that families and communities can but they can and they should think about creating the conditions so to do. Right now mind you I don't think Mr Cameron is too happy. Or Mr Murdoch. Or Rebekah Brooks. Or the public with them.

Without getting overly political, I can say where I think a lot of his policies will deliver the opposite of happiness, not least in some of the welfare changes, and the cuts to school building programmes, and the end of EMAs, and – well, there's universities of course – but as a general approach I have no complaint with it at all. I think if we genuinely applied this new approach it could lead to a lot of change.

My daughter has just done her AS levels and is apparently THE most examined year in schools history. We ask of our schools to deliver education and get kids through exams, all under the pressure of regular inspection. But the happiness factor is every bit as important as the exams, and should not be overlooked.

Our approach to the economy under both Labour and now the coalition and indeed governments around the world is to focus on GDP. Yet it is interesting that though we have grown much wealthier as a country and, most of us, as individuals, we are not happier. Professor Richard Layard, who is an advocate for happiness in policy-making, superimposed two graphs – one our wealth which showed a steady rise, and one on our happiness which showed a flatline ending with a bit of a dip. Fair to say poverty can certainly cause unhappiness, but it does not automatically follow wealth causes happiness. Some of the least happy people I know are among the richest.

81% of Brits apparently believe the Government **should** prioritise creating happiness over creating wealth, according to the New Economics Foundation (nef).

They brought together research from 400 scientists worldwide to come up with the equivalent of "5 a day" for well-being. They are:

- Connect with the people around you
- Be active
- Take notice – be curious and aware of the world around you
- Keep learning – try something new
- Give – do something nice for a friend or a stranger

Despite the phonehacking scandal, I promise that I will not do my usual rant about the modern media. But it is very hard to see how as a country we can be deemed happy when every day more than 2 million of our people feel the urge to buy the Daily Mail. How can we be happy knowing that merely to step out of our Middle England front door is to risk being mugged by out of control kids and asylum seekers?

Envy, hatred and anger do not lend themselves to happiness. Yet much of our media, most of the time, is now slavishly dedicated to making people feel jealous of others, blaming others for their problems, hating others for their actions and attitudes. They have created a kind of whingocracy in which the issues for moaning are put into the papers, and then the radio and TV stations can moan about them for the next 24 hours until the next lot of whinges come round. Add in the criminality we have seen exposed recently, the amorality, the venality, and it is not a happy scene.

The relentless negativity is a relatively new thing. The positive to negative ratio in our national press has gone from 3-1 to 1-18 in three decades. And if I have one big suggestion for a nice base for happiness – it is to focus more on your own life and experience and put the media largely to one side. There came a day when I genuinely ceased to care what the media said about me. It was liberating. It has helped my happiness.

So on this, I wish Mr Cameron all the best. I wish him all the best with a civil service machine that is not always quick to adapt to new thinking, and which in any event he is cutting to the bone. I wish him all the best with ministers who will probably say they did not come into politics to make people happy.

This is not a new approach of course. The tiny Buddhist country of Bhutan has for many years had Gross National Happiness as its main indicator, though the methodology is somewhat slanted in favour of the regime. Spin, I believe they call it.

Which brings me to myself, my own views and experience.

David Cameron, like Tony Blair before him, seems quite an upbeat and optimistic kind of chap. I think Gordon Brown would admit to be somewhere higher on the gloom ratings. And as Philip Gould suggested, so am I.

But then I sometimes wonder: are we here to be happy, or to be productive, to become better people, and make a better world?

I can *feel* happy reading a good book – you know that moment a few pages in where you think yep, this is going to be a good one, and then anything else is just a distraction … I can feel happy watching a good film or listening to good music …… But am I? Maybe it is less happiness than successful distraction from the reality of the human condition which is not so much permanent happiness or unhappiness as 'let's try to get through the day?'

Stimulation is not the same as happiness. Excitement is not the same as happiness. I'm not even convinced that contentment is the same as happiness, whatever the

dictionary may say.

Oddly given my own state, my mum is one of the happiest people I know. Rarely down, always smiley and singing, rarely a bad word to say and never a bad word said about her.

Yet often she would say to me ‘ why can’t you just be *content*?’ Well often I am. But I’m not sure if it is the same as happiness. I can be content after a good meal, but still worrying about a big project coming up that is making me edgy and nervous.

I can be content after a Burnley win but not happy that I happen to be besotted by a football club based four hours from where I live. I enjoy the drive there, hate that drive back. Every second Saturday I do it and win lose or draw between arrival home and MotD something happens and Fiona will say ‘I don’t know why you go to Burnley – it never seems to make you *happy*.’ It does make me pleased, excited, thrilled, engaged, enervated, often disappointed, even fulfilled but not happy that it takes four hours to get home to a partner who hasn’t even bothered to find out the score.

When I think back about happy moments, they are a strange mix, and the ones that you might expect to be there are not. I was closely involved in three election wins. These are big moments not just in my life but the life of the country. When I transcribed my diaries, I spotted a trend. Let’s start with 1997 …

The scene is Tony Blair’s house in Sedgefield and here is my diary entry, late at night after the campaign has finished and the country is about to vote …

‘TB said afterwards he would never have been able to do it without me. I said I’d loved every minute, then said “that’s a lie by the way.” I called home and spoke to the kids… I said life is never going to be the same again, because this is part of history and we’re all part of that, our whole family. Calum said “are we definitely going to win?” I loved the “we”. I said yes, I think so, and we might win big. After I put the phone down, I sat down on the bed, put my head in my hands and cried my eyes out. I don’t know what it was. Relief it was over. Letting go of the nervous energy. Pride. A bit of fear. It was all in there. But I felt we’d done a fantastic job. We were going to win and we were going to make a difference. I’d felt the emotion welling up in me for days… I’d been worrying about Dad’s health and was glad he and Mum would both see this happening, but sad that Bob (Fiona’s father) who’d always said one day Labour will get back, wasn’t there to see it, or even know that Fiona and I had been involved. ‘

Then fast forward to the next day, we have won bigger than any of us had ever imagined – we were even winning in seats we had not campaigned in – and here is my diary entry for the Festival Hall … ‘It was weird. I felt deflated. All around us people were close to delirium but I didn’t feel part of it. We were taken up to a room afterwards, and I said to TB, this is so weird, you’ve worked so hard for so long for something, it comes, you’re surrounded by people who are so happy, yet you don’t feel like they do, and you just want to get home to bed. He said he felt exactly the same. ‘

Four years later, we have won another landslide, the only moment I feel any joy was when I saw my other son Rory waiting for me at Millbank Tower when we came for the victory party, and here is how I close the entry for this, the day of our second great victory . ‘In some ways, I had enjoyed the night more than in 1997, but I still didn’t feel the kind of exhilaration others seemed to. It was also because I knew there would be no let up, and in all sorts of ways the future was unclear. Maybe it was just my nature.’

Now I am only up to 2001 in the published diaries but I am going to give you a sneak preview of 2005, another win … this is after the victory party in London … ‘I was now beginning to share TB’s sense of disappointment at the result. It was light by the time I left and I got a really nice reception from people as I was walking to Victoria Street. A few people were shouting out congratulations from cars,… but I felt a bit low about it all. … I said goodbye to a few people at party HQ and as I made for the door, there was a spontaneous round of applause. I stopped and looked back and there was a standing ovation going on, which I found really moving. I felt like these were the people I really loved working with … I felt my eyes filling with tears and must have looked like I was crying when I got into the cab home. ‘You should be happy,’ the cabbie said ‘Three in a row.’

So what do I make of all that? Well one, I cry a lot – as Rory said when The Blair Years was published – Dad, do we really have to have all this crying crap?’ Two, I cry when I am happy in the sense of my being fulfilled, job done. Three, it is family that has the capacity to move us most, because they are the people we love most. Four, I will always resent the fact that I did not enjoy three of the greatest days of my life. Five, other than in sport I find it hard to lose myself in mass emotion – I prefer to stand out against it than go along with it. But six, I never stop thinking about the next thing, and the next thing, and the fears about the challenge ahead will drive my mood every bit as much as any pleasure there may be in the moment.

For me happiness is not about the good moments – though they can build towards it - but about fulfilment. That may strike you as unnecessarily Presbyterian for someone who doesn’t do God, but I think the pursuit of those things that many people may think make them happy – fame, money, alcohol, drugs, quick hit relationships – are less likely to make people happy than give them a sense of elation the endurance of which is all too elusive.

If you ask me if I am happy that I devoted a large part of my life to helping Labour get elected and then helping Tony Blair in government, I will say yes. If you ask me if I was happy all the time doing it … read the books. Talk to Fiona and the kids, and understand why they think it is funny that I am standing here today making this speech.

If fame was the answer, then you wouldn’t have the extraordinary situation where ‘real people’ often seem happier than the famous. I know plenty of both. The famous ones are always, in general, more disgruntled than the not so well known who are likely to be more pressurised financially and in many other ways.

How many stories do you read of the rich and their problems? Or lottery winners who regret the win? The reason for Professor Layard’s graph diversion is that we adapt to wealth quickly. Get a bigger salary, get a bigger house, a bigger car, a more expensive holiday. Then sit around saying how much fun we had when we were struggling. And for the really wealthy … there is never enough. Ask Rupert Murdoch. There is only one Carlos Slim, the richest man in the world. And he probably wishes he was The Queen.

As for drugs and alcohol and gambling and the other well known areas of addiction, nobody can ever tell me that the addict finds happiness in a bottle, a needle or a punt.

So despite being grumpy, despite being a depressive who occasionally needs medication to deal with it I am reasonably happy. Now there’s a conundrum. Could even be a book title. The happy depressive. I am both, and sometimes at the same time. Because I am reasonably fulfilled, and the fulfilment has not been easy.

That’s the other thing – to me, any sense of happiness requires a sense of fulfilment and any fulfilment, worthwhile fulfilment, requires struggle. It doesn’t come easy.

I know this is not a universal view. Fiona’s version of my mum’s ‘why can’t you just be content?’ is ‘why do you keep needing to do so much?’ Her observation of my life patterns is that I decide to do something, throw myself into it, do it well, but then decide I need something else. ‘You’re never happy.’ That is not strictly true. I have moments … but the building of happiness through fulfilment is a long game.

So here is the theory I want to add to all those that previous speakers have given you on this theme – it is a rather dark one I confess, but then one of your local former MPs once called me the man who lived in the dark – it is that for the individual, we cannot know if we have lived a truly happy life until the very end.

I am now at the age, 54, where I do at least think about my own mortality. On the back nine of life as a golfer might say. I don’t think I am alone in wondering what death will be like, wondering what my final thoughts will be, wondering what the obits are likely to say – I have a fair idea of that one already.

On the final thoughts, I want to be able to say I had a full and fulfilling life because then I think I will die happy. So what will be the components? Family. Obviously you don’t wish sadness upon those you love but I want my partner and kids still to love me, and to have felt I was good to them. I want to believe that when my dad died he considered me a good son, and that when my mum goes – she is into her 80s – she will think the same. I want to know I have enjoyed a good range of friendships, personal and professional. I want to know that some of my emnities were worthwhile, that I made life harder for people who deserved it – you know, like Tories who think their divine right is to govern, or journalists who lie, cheat and never face up to the consequences of their lies and cheating.

I want to know I have worked hard and achieved much.

I want to be able say I was at least part of changing the world for the better. I want to be able to recall experiences that have endured for their pleasure and range and

intensity.

I have said to my kids that if I go doolally – again!! – and the option by then exists for euthanasia, I want to take it. The self*less* reason is not being a burden. The self*ish* reason is that I want to die thinking my own happy thoughts about the life I have lived, about the family I leave behind, about a legacy of thought and action and experience.

Death is bad enough any time. It is worse if the mind has gone.

I want to stay with the mind if I may. Because this may surprise you but if I look back and think of some of the best experiences of my life, that have helped shape the relative developing happiness I have now one would be my nervous breakdown in 1986.

Why? Because it was the worst experience of my life and I survived it. Because it gave me a yardstick for the rest of my life against which to compare other bad experiences. Because it taught me what I thought and what I valued – family, politics, doing rather than just talking. And because it gave me a taste of my own vulnerability and my own mortality. It was an irrational thought, but I thought I was going to die, and like a lot of people who have been to that abyss and come back, life is a lot better after that.

I'm happy that I can stand here today and remember as if it were yesterday the day I cracked up, and be fairly confident it won't happen again.

Quite an experience. I don't urge you to have one. But if you do I urge you if you do to try to turn it into something good.

So on that deathbed I will give thanks for my family, Fiona and the kids especially. I will thank friends, dead and alive. I will thank the people who gave me all the amazing opportunities I have had to do things in work and play. But I will also have a little nod to my madness vintage 86.

I don't thank my depression. I don't will it upon anyone. It is a horrible illness for which there is not enough understanding. The nearest I can come to describing it is that when it strikes you feel dead and alive at the same time. But I am content that I have learned to live with it. Pleased that I have accepted it as part of who I am, happy that after years of living in denial finally I got help, and though I retain a lifelong abhorrence of drugs pleased that I have a shrink I trust to tell me I think it might be a good idea if you took a few pills for a while.

I'm happy that it inspired me to write my first novel. The idea came to me riding my bike. I became a man possessed until I finished it. I told nobody I was doing it until it was done. It was like an enormous force within me that had to come out. I was so happy when I wrote it, even though I cried a lot on the way, so happy when it was published, so happy at the letters I get from people who say I am glad I am not alone, just as happy that people write and say at last I understand it a bit.

That is about fulfilment. Taking the bad and turning it into something good, a more creative expression of an experience and a time when I thought I was going to die.

My best friend John Merritt died of leukaemia. His daughter Ellie died of leukaemia. I became chairman of fundraising of Leukaemia and Lymphoma Research. Today I visited the haematology centre at the university and saw how £2.5m of the charity's money is being spent on clinical trials. I met patients and in talking to them, not only are they alive, but I feel John and Ellie's memory are alive in the work I do for the charity. Get good from bad.

So for me, happiness comes through fulfilment, personal, professional, political. I am an obsessive and a perfectionist and neither of these things are compatible with contentment, of self or of others. Yet I argue they are the traits that have led to at least some fulfilment, and the deeper happiness that has brought. I can get a five figure fee for a speech to a bank. I'm not going to say No. But I get more out of the pitch to M and S to get them to become a charity partner.

So what other moments of happiness can I recall?

I remember being on my uncle's farm in Scotland, getting a call from my dad, saying I had got 3 As in my A levels. That meant I got my place at Cambridge. But the happiness was because I had really worked and it paid off.

I didn't much like Cambridge. Messed around. Drank too much. Year abroad I was actually quite happy – free, finding myself, busking, writing soft porn and making money – By my last year I was even fairly happy at Cambridge.

Messed around. Became a trainee journalist. Loved it. Met Fiona. Some great times together but we have had some tough times. Read the diaries. I think if either of us were less strong characters we would not have survived together. But enduring relationships are fundamental to the kind of happiness I am outlining. We row, we snarl, we hear but don't listen. But I'm happy we stayed together. When my first book came out Fiona was asked to write a piece on living with Alastair Campbell. Like it was aids or malaria. 'On balance I am glad we stayed together'. Wow! … yet be honest, it is about the best most long relationships can hope for. On balance … glad we stayed together. And of course kids. Everyone says they love their kids. Yet so many don't act in a loving way. It is hard. I read my diaries and the truth is I tried to devote any spare time to them. But I know it wasn't enough. Work/life balance is hard. We should put our kids first but busy people can't and don't. But I am at my happiest when I am at my closest to them. And I know this too – a parent is never happier than his or her least happy child.

Happy moments. So many in sport. Calum at Scunthorpe when Burnley got promoted. Rory in Barcelona when United turned it round in injury time. Grace at the end of the London marathon saying John would have been so proud of me.

Here's a thought. So many of those moments had me in tears. This fulfilment thing runs deep. I cannot watch an Olympic ceremony without tears in my eyes. Often even the athlete isn't crying. But I see the flag, hear the anthem and I cry with joy for that person and his or her fulfilment. It can be a Bulgarian who got gold for Greco-Roman wrestling, but it'll still set me off.

Sport is responsible for so much happiness and joy. If someone said think of a week when you were really happy – a whole week – I might well go for the first Soccer Aid. Grew up wanting to be a footballer. I was rubbish. Aged 49 I am training under Ruud Gullit and Gus Poyet and I end up playing with Maradona in front of 72k people. I come off and Rory says 'sorry Dad, you were so out of your depth.' I know. And I don't care. I loved it. I was happy.

I learn so much from sport because I love building teams. None of the team I built have gone out and joined the slagging I get from the media hacks who don't know me. Greatest moments of satisfaction in the job with TB – probably Kosovo and Ireland. Because of the teamship required.

One step up is friendship. I know a lot of people. I don't have many close friends. Not real friends I would count on 100 per cent. Fiona. The kids. Others in my family.

I have lost friends. John. Richard Stott, my editor three times, including on my diaries. Mark Gault, who I lived with at university. My dad. We all know grief. How can we still be happy? Only by learning from the experience, and living with what we learned. You know what was the best soundbite I heard in my time in Downing Street. Well, one of them, and it came not from TB but the Queen, post 9/11. 'Grief is the price we pay for love.' I was sitting near Bill Clinton. 'Did you write that?' he whispered. No, I said. 'Well find out who did and hire him'.

Alex Ferguson once said to me that the true friend is the one who walks through the door as others are putting on their coats to leave. Great definition. I am happy with the friends I have. Some you'll know – him, Tony, Philip Gould, Brendan Foster. Others you won't.

So I have a great family. I have a small number of close friends. I live in a friendly street. I support a football club and a political party and two charities which all mean a lot to me. I have a complex sense of national identity – I am British first, then Scottish, then English, then Yorkshire, then London, then European.

All of these things make me connected. And the reason why money does not automatically make us happy is because it does not automatically connect us. If I had to list the countries where I sensed greater happiness it would not be the UK, nor the US. It might be Australia. It might be Ireland, certainly before the crash. It might also have been Ethiopia or Mozambique. It was where I felt a sense of people as families as communities as a people. And wealth had little to do with it.

I am lucky enough to have had two careers, and now a third weird mix as I work out what unemployed antichrists do. I get a lot of professional opportunities and make a decent living. I am lucky enough too to give of my time and money to others – and survey after survey shows giving is as likely to make us happy as taking. So if I can conclude with one of the defining British statements … I mustn't grumble …

I feel happy enough with the life I have lived and the life I am living. But I won't know for sure until the day I die. On that happy thought. Thank you.

**Transcript ends**

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