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A contented nation?

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Here we try to go deeper than the ins and outs of current electoral polemic. Mark Abrams reports research which shows how relatively agreeable we seem to find life, even if 'unfairness' still rankles. On page 441, we give some rather more objective facts of British society. And on page 443, Jonathan Power sees a deep unhappiness behind it all.

Well before the dissolution of parliament, politicians from both major parties had concentrated their public oratory on three highly depressing topics—the near-disastrous economic condition of the country; the utter incompetence and perfidy of their rivals; and the determination of extremists of both left and right to disrupt, and even destroy, the familiar structure of British society. By January, there seemed to be abundant evidence to substantiate this despairing diagnosis of the state of the nation: the three-day working week, record balance of payments deficits, bitter industrial disputes, bursts of panic buying by consumers, and almost daily downward swoops of the *Financial Times* index of share prices. Since then the doom-laden rhetoric of the politicians has become even more insistent, and the economic facts have certainly not recorded any significant improvements. How has this two-fold assault affected the mood and outlook of the British people?

The evidence provided by sample surveys of "subjective social indicators"—ie, surveys in which the respondent indicates his satisfaction or dissatisfaction with various aspects of life (his job, his income, his leisure and so on)—suggest that, at least until shortly before the dissolution was announced, the speeches and the economic facts had done very little to disturb the high levels of satisfaction reported by the average adult early in 1971, when the first of such surveys was carried out in this country by the Survey Research Unit of the Social Science Research Council. Then, when asked to indicate on a 0 to 10 scale (0 = complete dissatisfaction, 10 = complete satisfaction) how satisfied or dissatisfied he was with his health, his job, his housing and his leisure, the sample's average scores for each of these domains came well up towards the top end of the scale. Even the lowest average score (for leisure) was 7.3. The highest (for health) was 8.0. Our most recent replication of this survey (interviewing carried out from the end of October 1973 to mid-January 1974), and again with a national probability sample of 1,000 members of the urban electorate, showed very much the same high levels of satisfaction in these domains (see table 1). In each of them, some 50 per cent of all respondents reported a satisfaction of 7, 8 or 9, and another roughly 30 per cent gave themselves the top rating of 10.

Again, as in the earlier survey, after respondents had dealt separately with several aspects of life (including the district they lived in, the quality of British democracy, their education, their general financial position), they were asked to use the same 0 to 10 scale to express a general view. They were asked: "All things considered, how satisfied

or dissatisfied are you overall with your *life as a whole* these days?" The average score for the whole sample was 7.6. They went on to indicate that that was almost 10 per cent higher than where they would have put themselves on such a scale five years earlier; and looking forward, the average respondent estimated that, in five years' time, life would be sufficiently improved to reduce by almost 20 per cent the gap between his present level of

Table 1: Average ratings of satisfaction (0—10)

domain	1974	1971
job	8.3	7.8
housing	7.8	7.9
health	7.7	8.0
district	7.5	7.4
leisure	7.5	7.3
standard of living	7.4	7.3
quality of democracy	6.7	7.4
education	6.7	7.2
financial situation	6.6	5.5

sample: 1,000

satisfaction and the highest point (10) on the scale presented to him.

Other measures we employed in the interview yielded similar indications of widespread high contentment. When asked to use a 1 to 7 semantic differential scale to describe "my present life," a majority of respondents put ticks in the top two boxes (6 and 7) to portray their lives as interesting, enjoyable, full, hopeful and happy. And at another point in the interview, 80 per cent of respondents said that they agreed with the statement that "the average man is probably better off today than he ever was."

So far then, judged by the above measures, it would seem that the average adult in this country sees himself happily enjoying almost the best of

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