‘Bad old days and some good new ones’: taking stock of the good life in Australia since WW2

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History to liberate us from Memory

• Beware inventing pasts to justify the causes of the present

• Personal memory is selective, myopic, and appallingly deceptive

• The 1950s and 1960s are recalled as ‘idyllic’ because children were protected from the troubles of the adult world - yet the baby boomers were desperate to rebel against the straitened conservatism of their elders

• We have almost no evidence of the real prevalence of mental distress in the past against which to measure whether people are better or worse off now

• We CAN look at the mortality statistics, life span, causes of death, violence, trauma, AND at the culture of institutions.
The grey Moral, Melbourne middle class: 1930s

John Wesley on parenting:

‘Break their will betimes. Begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pain it costs, break the will if you would not damn the child. Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod and to cry softly; from that age make him do as he is bid, if you whip him ten times running to effect it....Break his will now, and his soul shall live, and he will probably bless you to all eternity’. [These phrases were drawn from a letter from his mother Susannah, written on 24 July 1732.]
Some bad stuff from the past

- Physical and psychological cruelty to children at home and at school
- Domestic violence and alcohol addiction
- Single-parent families caused by premature death
- Chronic illness and sudden death
- Corrosive financial insecurity for those outside the regular economy
- Emotional and sexual repression, frustration and misery (the Great Australian sleep out), abortions
- Personal frustration owing to unused talents
Some good things that happened after 1950

• Long boom and growth of regular employment

• Belated investment in human capital in education

• Growth of universities, scholarships and studentships

• Reliable contraception, especially the pill

• Antibiotics and immunization

• Cheap housing loans, slum clearance

• Expansion of horizons: media, travel, reading, films, mobility
Families and Solitaries

- Growth of state started with public health

- State welfare has grown to enable those without families to survive

- BUT families are changing - getting smaller → decline in family social capital
  → increase in solitaries

- Children more exposed to parental stress because fewer inhibitions, inside house more, TV and film

- Working mothers → children with other carers

- Increased hours, rising cost of living and housing → less family time
Our expectations

- We do expect things to be much better
- Perhaps problems are more visible than in past times
- Family ‘good lives’ under threat again from financial insecurity
- Australian ‘good life’ under threat from climate change and structural economic problems, now recession
- Need for a new social democracy
Lessons to be learned from the past: breaking down ‘The Club’

• 1890s Depression followed by economic stagnation and further depression in 1930s: Mistakes made:

• 1890s middle and upper class closed the gates of opportunity; retreat to private schooling as the definer of caste and life-time security -- vested interest in state leaving human capital formation to private sector

• 1930s Depression followed by WWII and radicalisation ➔ opening up of opportunity to those outside the club in new high schools and universities

• 1960s: middle class reaction ➔ state aid to middle-class Church schools enabled them to rebuild and grow: 1964 and 1970

• Opportunity lost to expand Australian Democracy.
RH Tawney wrote in 1950: (Keeping Left)

‘Democracy is unstable as a political system as long as it remains a political system and nothing more, instead of being, as it should be, not only a form of government but a type of society, and a manner of life which is in harmony with that type. To make it a type of society requires an advance along two lines. It involves, in the first place, the resolute elimination of all forms of special privilege which favour some groups and depress other, whether their source be differences of environment, of education, or of pecuniary income. It involves, in the second place, the conversion of economic power, now often an irresponsible tyrant, into a servant of society, working within clearly defined limits and accountable for its actions to a public authority.’