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Editorial: Horror of happiness

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The Howard haters want us all to think we are miserable

TODAY'S story in *The Australian* reporting research that shows us to be happy, as well as prosperous, only confirms what most of us know from our own experience. Certainly far too many people suffering debilitating disease or imprisoned in poverty by social disadvantage are not sharing in our present prosperity. And the plight of tens of thousands of indigenous Australians is a stain on our national character. But for most of us these are the best of times and, well, the best of times. According to research carried out by a pair of economists, Andrew Leigh and Justin Wolfers, Australians are a happy lot, coming in 12th out of 77 countries in terms of happiness and 19th out of 78 nations for life satisfaction. More than that, Australians have been shown to be a happy lot ever since pollsters started asking about such things in the 1940s. Yet despite our national good fortune, there are some affluent Australians who are doing it tough. They take no comfort from unemployment at a generational low and the way all income segments of society are richer than a decade ago. For these merchants of misery, research showing we are mainly relaxed and comfortable about most aspects of lives is a source of sadness. Because, while people who have built careers on hating John Howard and explaining how awful life is are still talking, nobody much is listening. And because relevance deprivation does terrible things to the egos of the opinionated, these suffering souls cannot admit their affections for the big state strategies of the Whitlam and Fraser eras are wrong, and then shut up. Instead they keep finding new, and ever more imaginative ways to explain how miserable we all are. Thus Clive Hamilton from the Australia Institute says we suffer from chronic affluenza. This disease causes us to build bigger houses and buy better BBQs, as well as all sorts of other games and gadgets that Dr Hamilton just knows we would not want if we were not searching for meaning in our lives. And Michael Pusey conducts surveys that show how 20 years of microeconomic reform has made us all wretched, especially people in the public sector, who fear their social status has slipped since the 1970s, when the Whitlam Government placed them at the pinnacle of social engineering power. And their political pals – the Greens, the detritus of the Democrats, and Labor's Left – mistake these sort of minority complaints for the cries of the dispossessed and respond by campaigning on how awful everything is.

But anybody who thinks this rejection of reality is funny should stop laughing, because it is denying us the chance of the serious policy debate we need on the economy. The Howard haters, angry at the way their interests are ignored, have locked Labor into a series of policy prescriptions that reflect the interests and attitudes of public sector union officials, academics, party apparatchiks and more than the occasional ABC broadcaster and Fairfax journalist, who just know that what they think matters most. And because they are not especially worried about money, mainly being higher-income earners who have done well from the Howard Government's tax cuts, they are all less interested in economic issues than symbolic politics. So for years they have campaigned on the three Rs of the broad Left – reconciliation, refugees and the republic. And they have defended their own interests above those of ordinary electors. Thus teacher union officials and their state education minister allies told us the Howard Government's demands for plain English report cards were unfair to ordinary pupils, when the people they really wanted to protect were teachers who disguise their poor classroom performance behind edu-speak. And now Labor and union leaders warn us the Howard Government's workplace reforms will send us all into serfdom, when the only likely losers will be ACTU officials. But come the next election, if the economy stays strong, worries over the workplace changes will likely have gone the way of the GST scare campaign and be forgotten.

When the desperadoes of despair can be bothered to talk about economics at all, they tell us all how unhappy we are – even though anybody old enough to remember the recession we had to have knows that for most of us times are good. If the electorate has ever heard of affluenza, its pleasure in possessions demonstrates it is not a disease anybody is worried about. As to Professor Pusey, if the voters have heard of him at all they may well wonder what he is talking about in an economy where we are as close to full employment as we have been for 30 years. And if ordinary people are even aware of commentators like Judith Brett, they may suspect her of sneering. Dr Brett is perhaps Australia's most acute political historian, but she is also a fierce warrior on behalf of her pals. In distinguishing between people who are "cosmopolitan" and "local" in their attitudes and experiences, she has written: "One aspect of globalisation is the development of human rights as a universal language which creates a universal human moral community coextensive with the cosmopolitan's potential field of knowledge. Locals still live inside much smaller moral communities." Guess which category includes the ordinary voters who will decide the next election. Some opposition thinkers understand there is no point in dismissing ordinary Australians like this. And Labor's best and brightest, including Lindsay Tanner and Craig Emerson, recognise the party needs to prove its economic credentials to win the next election. But the way to do it is not to perfunctorily complain that things are terrible before returning to special-interest pleading. It is time to attack the Howard Government for its profligate spending and its refusal to embrace a new round of national economic reform, rather than yearn for a golden age of public sector power. Unless of course Labor and its allies are happy telling us how times are tough – from opposition.

Bittersweet defeat

Our second-round loss was anything but second rate

WE may not have won the World Cup, or even our match against Italy, but it would take a pretty small mind to characterise the Socceroos' performance in Germany over the past two weeks as a defeat. Australia's test against Italy yesterday morning was the match-up that many never expected to happen. Australia, a relatively small nation of 20 million people that hadn't been to a World Cup finals since 1974, had never before made it to the ranks of the top 16 soccer-playing nations in the world. Australian soccer, developed and nourished since World War II by European immigrants and their children – many of whom would go on to hone their skills around the world – has been an also-ran code behind the more home-grown AFL, rugby and rugby league. Yet over the past fortnight this foreign sport, once cruelly derided as a "wog's game", revealed its power to exert over Australians the same hold it exerts over Brazilians, Spaniards, Britons and every other nationality in thrall to what much of the world calls the beautiful game. Perhaps the reason millions of Australians stayed up late and crowded the public squares of capital cities on chilly winter nights to watch the Socceroos is because they saw in their team a microcosm of Australia. The Socceroos' roster, after all, contains surnames from all over the world united to play under one Australian flag.

If ever there was a time when there was no shame in defeat, then the Socceroo's 1-0 loss to Italy's Azzurri was it. Through all four matches fought at this year's World Cup finals, Australia displayed a relentless and pragmatic playing style. Although defeated by Italy, Australia assuredly never surrendered. It was only a last-minute goal, shot as a penalty, that won the match for Azzurri. Despite what many believe was a dodgy call by Spanish referee Luis Medina Cantalejo, the fact remains that Australia never managed to mount enough of an attack to put one into Italy's net. That being said, Australia also held off Italy through an hour-and-a-half of regular play – something that was until very recently unthinkable. Socceroos players and fans are understandably upset. But as painful as this loss was, it demonstrated that Australia is capable of playing with the big boys on the world soccer stage. A dramatic loss by several goals would have been far more difficult to take. Australia's coach, the Dutch master Guus Hiddink, put it best when he said, "the team tried their hardest and we can have no regrets".

So rather than lament what could have been, sport-loving Australians should be celebrating the national team's historic success in the World Cup finals. As much as we respect his role in bringing home a historic result for Australia, we must disagree with Hiddink's assertion that his leading the Socceroos' performance does not merit a parade. Similarly, while all sports are subject to the human failings of officials, international soccer should do something about the impression of unfairness that was created during the Socceroos' World Cup campaign. Leaving aside yesterday's controversial call that gave

Italy their last-minute chance to score, the actions of English referee Graham Poll during the Croatia match are also under scrutiny by the sport's governing body, FIFA. Cricket has a third umpire as well as an on-field appeals process that adds a bit of democracy and fairness to calls; perhaps "howzat!?" should become a regularly heard cry on the soccer field as well as the cricket pitch. But these complaints are minor compared to the Socceroos' performance and the greatness it portends for 2010's World Cup in South Africa. In the meantime, Australians should be looking forward to catching up on their sleep – and the footy.

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