

Letters

The best gauge of civic wellbeing is not GDP

You are right to argue that calls are growing for new measures of societal progress (“The secret of measuring national wellbeing”, FT View, June 19). But your other arguments are incomplete and behind the times.

First, although it is true that gross domestic product does not take account of inequality, environmental damage nor leisure time, you miss the central point – GDP’s problem is that it does not measure feelings. Human feelings are the only things that matter (unless one wishes to count, and I would, non-human animal feelings). Even environmental issues, inequality, leisure and so on – all these do not

matter in themselves but are instead indirect proxies for what truly counts. How people feel is what matters.

Second, it does not make sense, as you assert, to let a “thousand flowers bloom”. A thousand numbers on bird song, butterfly numbers, baby deaths, bubble bath purchases, BMWs and the rest can certainly be collected, but at best they are simply potential markers of, or possible correlates with, human feelings.

Third, it is true that one element of the good life is deciding for yourself what the good life means. That is why we have to listen to people’s expressed feelings and why, although you do not mention it, the UK is far ahead of almost all nations. As part of official government statistics, the Office for National Statistics now collects annual data on happiness, anxiety, worthwhileness of life and life satisfaction.

Feelings data will dominate data collection in our world in the very long

run. I know it is difficult to grasp for anyone who has had a conventional training in economics, but one day this will be seen as common sense.

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