

## Optimism at a depressing time

*Between state capture destroying confidence in the country, Eskom undermining its economic growth, global economic crises, and people who think burning universities will get them free rides to great jobs, times have been depressing. But it's worth looking on the bright side of life.*

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My pharmacist has a great attitude. When he sees customers, they're usually ill or depressed or broke, or all of the above. So he has a sign above his counter, with the immortal Monty Python lyrics:

*Some things in life are bad.  
They can really make you mad.  
Other things just make you swear and curse.  
When you're chewing on life's gristle,  
Don't grumble, give a whistle!  
And this'll help things turn out for the best.  
And... always look on the bright side of life!*

Without seeing the crucified Eric Idle cheerfully singing and whistling, its humour is perhaps lost on some customers, but it certainly cheers me up more than the usual trite motivational tripe you find on office walls.

I write this sitting in an airport, about to fly to Australia to speak at [Ecoforum 2016](#). (If you're in Fremantle this week, look me up for a drink.)

Excited as I am to go, my mood is tempered by sadness at having to leave home for a week, the frustration of a two-hour delay on the very first leg of the trip (remind me why we keep bailing SAA out?) and the stodgy weight of a Wimpy burger which is as far as the cuisine at George Airport stretches.

It is also dampened by the knowledge that I'll be asked to explain what the hell is going on in South Africa, what with finance ministers being summonsed on criminal charges, presidents interdicting reports on state capture, failing electricity and water infrastructure, massive budget overruns on new power stations, diplomats siding with the least democratic and most corrupt regimes in the world, and students burning down our best universities. I will not enjoy this discussion, especially not with packed-for-Perth expats with an acquired Australian accent and a smug told-you-so air.

Worldwide, things have been tough since 2008, as libertarian Ron Paul predicted 15 years ago, and Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises predicted almost a century earlier. Governments can't just keep printing money, inflating away government debt and punishing responsible savers, without inevitably blowing economic bubbles, which inevitably collapse.

Henry David Thoreau once wrote: "Government has never furthered any enterprise but by the alacrity with which it got out of the way."

That after so many booms and busts, governments can only think to get in the way to intervene, and the only intervention they keep coming up with is the very same thing that caused the booms and busts in the first place – easy money – speaks volumes for the idea that even the most respected governments have the public's interest at heart. They dilute the value of the money in the pockets of the people, only to pay off their own debts, or hand it to corrupt banks to lend to big business. The history of the last century's Keynesian economic policy is nothing but wealth redistribution, from the poor to the rich.

Economists, usually employed by the government, are under the misapprehension that Keynes is where it's at. The disaffected youth is under the misapprehension that the inflationary monetary policy and political cronyism is actually capitalism, which therefore must fall.

In South Africa, too, a lot of the disillusionment of the poor and the youth is aimed not at a corrupt and failing government, but at straw men like "white monopoly capital", neo-colonialism, and Western imperialism. The unfulfilled and unfulfillable promises of socialist rhetoric – of free housing, free jobs, free healthcare, free water, free electricity, free education – is coming back to bite the ruling party, as free marketeers always predicted it would.

So, all in all, this doesn't seem like a good time to be optimistic. In fact, in the short term, I believe South Africa is in for a world of pain, socially, economically and politically. In the last decade, we sacrificed a 10% larger economy, and a million new jobs, just to Eskom's failure to maintain electricity infrastructure. It's impossible to tell how much corruption has cost the country, but it must be at least as much. Water rationing will be the next constraint to growth. If the last decade was hard, the next decade will be worse.

Yet amid all this gloom, it is worth being reminded of the bigger picture of where we find ourselves, one-sixth of the way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Contrary to the prophets of doom, who always have to postpone the due date of their dire predictions, the present crisis is merely a blip on a centuries-long story of human progress and prosperity.

I was reminded of this by a pair of articles, by Ronald Bailey and Marian Tupy, both reviewing Johan Norberg's new book, *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*.

The strange thing is that nobody believes the world is a better place than ever, and getting better still. China is the most optimistic country in the world, with 41% of people believing the world is getting better. The rest of the world lags far behind. In Sweden, it's only 10%. In the US, only 6%. In Britain and Germany, it's 4%, and in France and Australia, it's only 3%. I

This is astonishing, considering the scale of the improvements in human living conditions over the past decades and centuries. Almost everyone, at virtually every point in human history, would have been less prosperous, have less leisure time, be less healthy, and live less long.

In 1800, 94% of the world's people lived in abject poverty. As recently as 1990, this figure was 37%. Today, it's below 10%. In the last 30 years, global GDP rose by as much as it did in the previous 30,000 years.

In Europe, the murder rate during the middle ages was over 30 per 100,000 people (0.03%). Today, it's one (0.001%). Despite appearances, we live in the most peaceful time in human history.

Illiteracy has more than halved, just since 1990. Today, 86% of all adults can read. In 1950, it was 40%. In 1800, it was 12%.

You can dig up far more of these statistics at [Human Progress](#), a project of the Cato Institute, and [Our World in Data](#), a project curated by Max Rosen. They paint a fascinating picture of relentless progress, by almost every measure you care to take, despite perennial pessimism.

We know exactly what is at the root of that progress: the individual freedom to pursue the best interests of ourselves, our families and our communities, under light-touch regulation by a small, efficient and above all, honest, government. Inasmuch as those things are under threat, we'll experience short-term reversals. But history suggests that they do not last. Ultimately, the human will to live long and prosper wins out.

Despite today's troubles, and the troubles of the next decade or so, the bigger picture is that all of us are living longer, healthier and fuller lives than ever before.

If none of those reasons for optimism convinces you, let me turn to my instant messaging account (Telegram, strongly encrypted to avoid interception by governments and other criminals). Reasons for optimism, I've been told, include music, food, beaches, and love. And so they do.