

# WHY ARE SO MANY PEOPLE SO PESSIMISTIC IN SO MANY DIFFERENT COUNTRIES?

by Everett Carll Ladd

Opinion surveys taken in many countries around the world have been reporting a common finding: Majorities of record or near-record proportions expressing dissatisfaction with or pessimism about their countries' political and economic performance and their own personal prospects.

Some of these results are readily explained. Polls taken late last year by Gallup for the European Community in 18 countries of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union found huge dissatisfaction with the new institutions. For example, 63% said they were dissatisfied with democracy as they saw it working in their respective nations. Economic pessimism was high almost everywhere. All this is understandable. The transition from the old Communist order really is painful; that system collapsed only after it had failed utterly.

But high levels of public dissatisfaction are also being found in that most prosperous, free, and stable group of countries, the advanced industrial democracies. The reports coming out of them read as though each is experiencing a unique national malaise, but taken together these reports tell a remarkably similar story.

In the case of Canada, we see in the polling by Decima that over 80% say they are dissatisfied with the performance of the country's federal government and 65% dissatisfied with their own provincial government, that only 7% call the Canadian economy "good" (with literally no one calling it "excellent"), that 80% are dissatisfied with "the direction the country is going in today," and that 65% believe that their personal prospects for the future are worse now than they were a few years ago. Shortly before Brian Mulroney announced he was stepping down as prime minister and leader of the Progressive

Conservative party, Gallup Canada found only 17% approving his handling of his job, 76% disapproving. But virtually all of the country's politicians—including the leaders of the other three national parties—as well got negative marks.

In France, economic pessimism is rampant, and the entire political class comes under intense criticism. The ruling Socialists appear posed for a massive defeat in the upcoming (first round, March 21) elections for the National Assembly. Polls taken by Institut BVA suggest, for example, that they may not win more than 100 or so of the 555 seats, compared to 400 for their two principal right-of-center opponents, the Union for French Democracy and the Rally for the Republic.

Indicative of the dark mood prevailing in Great Britain, 49% of persons living there, interviewed by Gallup in February, indicated they would "like to go and settle in another country" if free to do so—the highest proportion recorded since that question was first asked in 1948. Anthony King, a professor of government at Essex University, wrote of these and related findings that Britain is "approaching a crisis of national morale."

The situation is much the same elsewhere in Europe, in Germany, Italy, and Spain, for example. And here in the US, throughout 1992 polls recorded high levels of negativism and worry, that apparently contributed mightily to the defeat of a sitting president. What's happening? What accounts for so much public dissatisfaction in so many different, generally prosperous and fortunate, countries?

One answer is that given by the Clinton campaign last year—that it's all the economy—but we have abundant evidence that much more is at play. For one thing, the increase in professed dissatis-

faction in many of these countries preceded the current economic dip. For another, dissatisfaction in the US reached its high point at a time when most indicators showed the economy growing again. Indeed, in the fourth quarter of 1992, when the election was held, real gross domestic product was growing at a 4.8% rate—the third best quarterly showing since 1984—and total real GDP was the highest it had ever been.

It will take more work before we can adequately explain this striking and important contemporary phenomenon of persistently high public pessimism in the most fortunate of nations. But here are three suggestions on where to look for its causes. First, there appears to have been a discovery *en masse* that money really doesn't buy happiness. The economies of the advanced industrial democracies are in fact great success stories; other areas of social performance—from matters involving the family, to drug use, to crime—show far less comforting trends.

Second, publics all across the industrial world don't know what to do about modern government. They see no alternative to its playing a large role, but they are increasingly frustrated as they see it malperforming and increasingly doubtful that it can be made to work better.

Finally, it's striking to see how so many of the measures of national satisfaction, confidence, etc., began their upward climb from historically observed levels at the full onset of the television age—in the US in the 1960s. The pattern of American answers to the entire mix of national assessment questions is dramatically different—more negative—over the past quarter century than what it had been in the preceding three decades.