



## Liveability – for whom?

I recently had the opportunity to visit the city of Melbourne, Australia. I must say it came as no surprise to subsequently learn that Melbourne had been named by *The Economist* Intelligence Unit as the most liveable city in the world for the fourth year in a row.

To construct this liveability index, every city is assigned a rating on more than 30 qualitative and quantitative factors across five broad categories: stability, health care, culture and environment, education and infrastructure.

Melbourne scored a perfect ranking for health care, education and infrastructure. But some other quality-of-life factors caught my attention as a visitor to this award-winning city.

There is abundant green all around. It is clearly a place where nature is protected and preserved within the bounds of the city itself. There are also many beautifully maintained parks whose immaculate grooming reflects the importance of these public spaces.

The built environment is equally well maintained. There is a sense that history matters – with heritage buildings taking their rightful place beside modern structures.

Walkability in the downtown core is enabled by dense design. A free light rail service in the core helps cover longer distances.

Melbourne is fostering its creativity. Public art and sculptures line pedestrian bridges and river walks throughout the city.

But international comparisons of liveability are interesting only to the extent that we can apply their lessons. On this front, we can say “no worries.”

Eight of the top ten ranking cities from 2014 are in Australia and Canada. Vancouver, Toronto and Calgary ranked third, fourth and fifth, respectively, on the international list. We should recognize and celebrate the quality of life that we enjoy in this country.

Unfortunately, international rankings often miss the mark in several important respects. No Canadian city would reach a perfect score on infrastructure, which needs serious investment – not just in terms of a major infusion of capital. An equally vital investment of time and effort is required to resolve a fundamental problem: current governance restrictions that hamper cities' ability to independently raise and spend money to support their respective agendas.

Canadian cities also fall short on public transit. Progress has been made in several centres over the past few decades. In 2010, for example, the American Public Transportation Association named the city of Montreal as the best public transit system in North America.

But there is clearly a need to update and modernize public transit both into and within major urban cores throughout the country. Most drivers in major urban centres will tell you that they waste hours on a daily commute that could be far better spent caring for their children and elderly parents.

Liveability scales may not readily apply when it comes to affordability. Granted, the original purpose of the liveability index was to rank cities according to their attractiveness to expatriate executives. These individuals are unlikely to be concerned about price because they can afford to pay for expensive housing or are subsidized by their respective companies. But the reality is that the cities named most liveable in Canada are the least affordable in terms of housing – a serious and ongoing problem.

While liveable cities may offer a wide range of recreational and cultural programs, lower- and modest-income households may not be able to participate. Unfortunately, the children in these families miss out on opportunities from which they would benefit immeasurably.

Finally, there is not sufficient attention paid to questions of accessibility. The latter should be understood not only from the perspective of getting in the door. We need to ask who is getting in the door. Are community events and organizations inclusive? Do they reflect the face of the community? Are they sufficiently diverse in terms of race, income and ability?

I am proud that several Canadian cities ranked so highly on *The Economist* international scale. At the same time, it clearly is a scale tipped in favour of the well-off who already benefit greatly from the amenities that good-quality cities have to offer.

A liveability index ideally should be constructed on a foundation of inclusion. We need to ask more questions about the questions – before we can say that our cities have got it right.

*Sherri Torjman*

Copyright © 2015 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy  
1354 Wellington Street West, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Ottawa, ON K1Y 3C3 CANADA  
E-mail: [caledon@caledoninst.org](mailto:caledon@caledoninst.org) Website: [www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org) Twitter: @CaledonINST  
Tel/Fax: (613) 729-3340