

The nation's laggards, or its leaders?

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As summer performs an extreme makeover on Nova Scotia – transforming wintry gulag into earthly paradise – I find myself dangerously drawn toward optimism.

So indulge me a moment, while I argue this province and this region are leading Canada – by at least one measure.

Bobby Kennedy started to define this measure in the 1960s, when he was touring the U.S. as a presidential hopeful.

Days before he was assassinated on June 5, 1968, Kennedy delivered a landmark speech in which he challenged that conventional measurement of economic growth known as GDP.

The Gross Domestic Product, he said, "measures everything except that which makes life worthwhile."

This quotation is now a rallying cry for the "happy people" lobby – that growing legion of advocates who want us to institute a "soft" measure called Gross National Happiness (GNH) and another softie called the Genuine Progress Index. None of the happy people likes the GDP – because it rolls everything into a big boiling vat of economic activity.

Yes, the overall economy grows if a new miracle drug comes to market. It also takes off if we have to spend \$1 billion fighting forest fires this summer – and lose \$3 billion worth of timber in the process.

In addition, as Kennedy said, there are those things that the GDP does not measure. "It does not allow for the health of our families, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It is indifferent to . . . the safety of our streets.

"It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, or the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. . . . GDP measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country."

In short, GDP does not measure the quality of our lives, the health of people, or the sustainability of our communities.

Well, I don't believe for a minute that you can enjoy quality of life in the absence of prosperity, but I still think the happy people may be on to something here.

In Atlantic Canada, for instance, we're so darned joyful it's a wonder we can stand ourselves. Why do I say this?

Just this week, I finished writing a research report – based on more than 1,800 interviews with Atlantic Canadians – that showed more than 90 per cent of people in this region are satisfied with their work. An astounding proportion (98 per cent) seem to like their co-workers.

"Gadzooks!" I said to myself. "What goes on here?"

Naturally enough, I went looking for conflicting evidence. And found none.

Instead, I came across a sunny three-part report whose author concludes this region is a sort of work "paradise." Based on a 35,000-person Health Canada survey on Work-Life Conflict in Canada, it describes a region in which people toil harder, longer, happier and with a deeper sense of dedication.

Be still, my heart, there's more.

A University of British Columbia professor (John Helliwell) applies an internationally approved set of indices that make up – are you ready for this? – Subjective Well Being (SWB). This index looks at connectedness to family, friends, community and work.

And guess what? Atlantic Canada is the best place to live in Canada, even as Canada is one of the best places to live on the planet.

Now, I know some really smart people who would tell you that this kind of thinking is dangerously delusional. For while we raise a glass to our Gross Regional Happiness and salute our Genuine Progress, the region's economy continues to trail the nation in terms of GDP growth.

At the same time, the Rest of Canada (ROC) grows more sullen about transferring vast stores of its wealth to our region.

Our "soft" numbers, in short, are not budging the hard measures of real growth.

But wait a minute.

While the sky sings blue and the sun sets slowly over the big lake at Kejimikujik, can't we imagine a world in which this region's soft assets – from educated workers to short commuting times – attract all kinds of smart money?

A world in which we soft-sell our way to hard progress.

Like I said, the happy people may have something going for them, and maybe we should work with them – as long as they promise not to get too darned delirious and annoying.

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