

WESTERN **Standard**

GEROW: Canada is a freer country than most, but still not free

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A Canadian, in North Vietnam, asks if they can drink their beer outside the hotel on the street, the host says: “Of course you can, it’s a free country”.

It’s a bad joke, and like all bad jokes we need an explanation.

Every year, The Human Freedom Index ranks 162 countries from most free, to least. Canada has consistently held a high ranking on the list and is apparently the 4th freest country in the world as of 2019 despite the enduring threat of violence for drinking beer in the street. Vietnam ranked 117 on the HFI, barely out outside of the least free quartile.

The Human Freedom Index – published by The Fraser Institute, The Cato Institute and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom – is well written and its methodology is well explained. At over 400 pages it’s an easy and interesting read.

However, Canadians who hold liberty as paramount have a hard time reconciling the fact that something as simple as drinking a beer on the street is not permissible in a place which is among the top 1 per cent of most free nations, while it is permissible under a flag bearing the hammer and sickle in countries that rank barely outside the bottom quartile of least free countries. And beer drinking is the least of their concerns.

Guns? They’re not on the list. Nor is there an indicator for self defense and the definition of property rights is too vague to assume it extends to firearms.

What about heavy taxation? The Fraser Institute also released studies in 2019 that show how the average Canadian family will pay 44.7 per cent of its income in taxes, an amount considered oppressive by any humane standard. This is acknowledged in the HFI under the “top marginal tax rate” portion in the economic freedom group of indicators. Canada scores a 5 out of 10, or roughly the same as the average Canadian family’s net revenue. But the top marginal tax rate only makes up approximately 2.5 per cent of the total HFI score.

In the personal freedom group, women’s safety and security receives a score of 10/10. Which seems high for a country that has been globally lambasted for its record on missing and murdered indigenous women. Disappearance is measured in a category with conflict and terrorism and receives a 10/10 also. So, something doesn’t add up. Is the data incomplete? Or are facts being sensationalized?

The personal freedom category is split into two sub-groups. The first is legal protection and security, to which the two former indicators belong. The second is specific personal freedoms,

such as movement, religion, association, etc. It is a fine line when it comes to balancing these ideas as legal protection and security are generally considered a prerequisite for maintaining specific personal freedoms.

Yet when protecting those freedoms, the state has a tendency for its hand to grow heavy and its will to grow strong, such as imposing restrictions on free speech hidden behind the guise “hate” laws. The HFI does not have a provision for over-protection and it doesn’t appear to measure free speech specifically, although it is inherent in measurements of religious freedom, association and expression.

The thing to keep in mind is that The Human Freedom Index measures one country against 161 other countries. It is comparing relative freedom and only from data which is comparable from one country to another. There is no agorism yard stick. So Canada is freer than most other countries, and still not actually free.

The metrics and analysis in the HFI should be taken with a grain of salt, but let’s not discount the value of the index. It’s a gold mine for free market policy wonks. Income per capita in the top 25% of the freest countries is 3 times that of the average lower 75%. Even allowing a heavy contingency for improper weighting of indicators, minor data faults and loose interpretations of freedom, it is a very impressive statistic in defense of free markets and personal liberty.

In measuring up the Human Freedom Index, we should consider the words of Rousseau.

“Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains.”