

Looking for the ultimate utopian society

By **Mark Pavilons**

The world is a very interesting place, and since Ontarians are inundated by election promises, it's a good time to take stock.

My son and I discussed the pros and cons of various systems over breakfast one morning. I pointed out that there are many regimes, dictatorships and government systems, and each has its pros and cons.

What's important is the human condition. It has little to do with power, political stripes or military might, but how people live their lives.

One nearby source of speculation and misconception is Cuba, one of my bucket list destinations. My late uncle visited dozens of times and fell in love with the place.

Cuba went through a lot of turmoil and growing pains in the 1950s, especially when Batista was ousted in favour of Fidel Castro. Cuba is one of the few remaining Marxist-Leninist socialist states, where the role of the Communist Party is enshrined in its Constitution.

It's a multi-ethnic country from diverse origins.

Cuba is a bit of an enigma. It had ties with Russia during the Cold War and has been known for human rights violations. Yet Cuba is a founding member of the UN, G77 and is one of the world's only planned economies. According to the Human Development Index, Cuba has high human development and ranks highly in health care and education.

Their state-controlled planned economy has some benefits. Most of the means of production are owned and run by the government and most of the labor force is employed by the state.

Every Cuban household has a ration book, entitling it to a monthly supply of food and other staples, which are provided at nominal cost.

Before Castro's 1959 revolution, Cuba was one of the most advanced and successful countries in Latin America. Cuba ranked 5th in the hemisphere in per capita income, 3rd in life expectancy, 2nd in per capita ownership of automobiles and telephones, and 1st in the number of television sets per inhabitant. Cuba's literacy rate, 76%, was the fourth highest in Latin America. Cuba also ranked 11th in the world in the number of doctors per capita.

While we would consider their wages meager (averaging \$50 to \$100 per month), there is virtually no homelessness in Cuba, and 85% of Cubans own their homes and pay no property taxes or mortgage interest. Mortgage payments may not exceed 10% of a household's combined income.

Cuba has tripled its market share of Caribbean tourism in the last decade. Cuba's literacy rate of 99.8 percent is the tenth-highest globally, due largely to the provision of free education at every level. Cuba's high school graduation rate is 94 per cent.

Cuba has the highest doctor-to-population ratio in the world and has sent thousands of doctors to more than 40 countries around the world. According to the World Health Organization, Cuba is known the world over for its ability to train excellent doctors and nurses who can then go out to help other countries in need.

So here we have a strict regime, strangely foreign in our eyes. And yet, you can't ignore some of these statistics, rates we would love to achieve here in Canada. I know both the NDP and PCs are calling for cuts in bureaucratic waste but no one has suggested a cap on mortgages!

Let's switch to the very interesting land of Norway, which maintains the Nordic welfare model with universal health care and a comprehensive social security system.

The country has the fourth-highest per capita income in the world on the World Bank and IMF lists. It has the world's largest sovereign wealth fund, with a value of \$1 trillion U.S. Norway ranks first on the World Happiness Report, the OECD Better Life Index, the Index of Public Integrity, and the Democracy Index. Norway also has one of the lowest crime rates in the world.

Norway is considered to be one of the most developed democracies and states of justice in the world. Norway is a unitary constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government, wherein the King of Norway is the head of state and the prime minister is the head of government.

The standard of living in Norway is among the highest in the world.

Public health care in Norway is free (after an annual charge of around 2000 kroner for those over 16), and parents have 46 weeks paid parental leave. The state income derived from natural resources includes a significant amount from petroleum production. Norway has an unemployment rate of 4.8% and average hourly wages in Norway, are among the highest in the world.

It also has state-provided, geared-to-income housing options. The overall vision of the government's housing policy is that everyone should have adequate and secure housing in a good local environment. A key aspect of Norwegian housing policies has been that everyone should be able to own their own houses or flats.

Norway has the world's largest registered stock of plug-in electric vehicles per capita.

No, you're not dreaming. But, unlike their Cuban counterparts, Norwegians pay very hefty income taxes to offset the government costs.

Would you mind paying half your salary in taxes if you were given free or subsidized post-secondary education and housing, and guaranteed a job?

On paper, both of these countries are great options.

I love Canada, but I don't love what we've done with the place, or everything we've created.

Instead of enjoying life to its fullest, we scrape by; live in mansions we don't need and drive expensive fossil-fuel burning cars. We don't take mid-day siestas nor do we take our allotted holidays each year.

I'm not suggesting we appoint a king or shift to Communist ideology.

But maybe a few steps to the right or left, in an attempt to improve the plight of average citizens, is in order.