



Viewpoint

More than this: Liveable Melbourne meets liveable Vancouver

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ABSTRACT

Lessons from two leaders in the liveable cities race, Vancouver and Melbourne, demonstrate that these cities have followed a quite similar development, policy and planning path and now ride the crest of the wave while facing comparable challenges in preparing for the future. Success in urban liveability speaks to the conditions of life for the luckily satisfied few. An urban liveability that is also sustainable is possible but demands thinking about two other groups for whom the city is responsible: those who cannot meet their needs today, and those who will live in the future city. Melbourne offers an exciting notion of what living in the city is for and a sociability in public life that benefits from an intact equity argument at the national scale. Vancouver, by contrast, offers a compelling vision of urban life, for good, throughout the life cycle, one that brings with it an increasingly interactive, partnership-oriented and aspiring relationship between urban residents and their local government. The City of Melbourne is the showpiece, the workplace, and the venue for the young and restless to play. Vancouver has a regional government able to do the heavy lifting of narrowing the urban/suburban divide in metropolitan vision and priorities. In Melbourne, no such metropolitan entity exists, and regional governance is the domain of the state government, protecting established relationships and sharing common interests with big developers.

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Introduction

An August 30, 2011 headline in Melbourne, Australia's major daily newspaper, *The Age*, gloats: "Live with it Canada, we're better." Referring to the world's most liveable city rankings established by the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, this one-upmanship is a product of Melbourne's recapture of the title from Vancouver, Canada, the winning city each year from 2002 to 2010. The terms of this contest may well be rigged. Still, we can draw upon the success of both Melbourne and Vancouver to earn such elite accolades in order to ask what it is that wins both cities their bragging rights. Looking comparatively, as a Canadian and an Australian urbanist who have swapped home cities to learn about the other, reveals that where Melbourne shines, Vancouver downpours and *vice versa*, and the difference is more than a feature of reversed seasonality.

This Viewpoint compares the competing cities in terms of their similar urban development context over the past two decades and then delineates key elements that, we suggest, provide a specific and comparative advantage for each city. Melbourne offers a lower level of socioeconomic disparity than Vancouver, which translates into a suite of policy discourses oriented around *equity*

arguments. That is, in Melbourne equity arguments – questioning the distribution of capital, goods and access to services throughout the economy and, importantly, distinguished from economic efficiency as the benchmark for evaluating social welfare or the common good – are prominent in arguments about policy choices, from the federal scale on down to the city scale. By contrast, and for multiple reasons that include but are not exhausted by decisions to 'download' welfare and social service provision at the provincial and federal scales, the use of an equity argument is becoming less and less tenable in Vancouver over time. The two cities' cores are planned for different primary purposes and demographic groups. Melbourne is a successful example of the CBD as a center of post-industrial economic development, tourism, and a particular kind of lifestyle. Vancouver is a successful example of the CBD as a viable place to live throughout the life cycle. Further, Melbourne's lack of a regional government may limit residents' ability to engage in metropolitan future-oriented thinking; Vancouver's regional government maintains this channel for region-wide dialog on many important issues, such as transportation and affordable housing, issues that in light of federal and provincial 'downloading', might only be fairly and efficiently dealt with at this scale. As a final point of distinction, Melbourne and Vancouver exhibit different visions of the reality and potential of citizen–government relationships in the planning and management of the city, suggesting different possibilities for leadership and new future directions.

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Liveable sustainability? Sustainable liveability? There is a great deal we could say about what makes a city liveable, what makes a city sustainable, and where the twain may meet. Here, we begin with the most well-known definition of sustainable development: “Meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 1). Numerous other, more technical, definitions of sustainability have been proposed, tying sustainability outcomes to calculations of economic throughput of materials (Daly, 1996), aggregate measures of ecological footprint (Rees & Wackernagel, 1996), maintainance of key stocks of critical natural capital (Pearce, 1993) or backcasting from system principles (James & Lahti, 2004), among others. However, the definition cited above from the World Commission on Environment and Development is useful for the key tension it presents between the immediate needs of the present generation and the needs of future generations, with an interest in the precautionary deferral of immediate gratification. This tension between gratification now and justice later connects with a tension that is long recognized within the concept of liveability. As Ley (1996, p. 33) summarized, this tension has been expressed in class terms: “From the beginning, then, the category of urban liveability was polyvocal; for the middle class it implied a more healthy environment and attention to culture and the arts; for the inner city it carried a more rudimentary sense of social justice in such areas as jobs, housing, and public services.” Like everything else in the social world, the concept of ‘liveability’ is laced with power, and in the contemporary urban context, “Over its 20 years of widespread usage, the term has served a range of masters. The contest over its meaning reveals much about the various publics who have competed for the power to define the quality of urban life” (Ley, 1996, p. 34). Much the same history can be traced for use of the term sustainability in contemporary cities: despite races to specify and calculate levels of sustainability of activities and places, use of the term faces a similar values-based negotiation of whose sustainability, in what initial and specific instances, and at whose expense (Haughton, 1997; Holden, 2012; Satterthwaite, 1997; Stren, White, & Whitney, 1992). In this sense, sustainability and liveability both imply competing normative premises and evaluative standards, and their various formulations identify different human causes of social, economic and environmental problems and prescribe different remedies to those problems (Vanderheiden, 2008). These remedies need to be acceptable to the citizens of a city in the present moment, and to be seen as the product of political and cultural decisions to support certain practical and institutional arrangements.

We would venture that we can substitute in the notion of “liveability” for the ideal of “meeting the needs of the present generation.” To do so involves breaking down ‘the present generation’ into the relatively advantaged, who can meet their daily needs, and the relatively disadvantaged, who cannot always do so. To stretch liveability toward sustainability requires an additional step: to consider ‘future generations’, those who will live in the future city. This gives us three different cities for our comparison: the city of the satisfied, experiencing liveability; the city of the disadvantaged, not experiencing liveability; and the city of the future, caught between both, craving and fighting sustainability. We will return to these three categories at the end of this Viewpoint to offer something of a ‘balance sheet’ on which Melbourne and Vancouver sit neck-and-neck in the battle to provide liveability for the satisfied, Melbourne offers an edge to the disadvantaged and Vancouver, an edge to those who will inhabit the city of the future.

Melbourne is a lot like Vancouver

There are many ways in which metropolitan Melbourne is very much a metropolitan Vancouver with a few more years behind it,

a few more generations of growth and decay. Melbourne was founded in 1835 compared to Vancouver, 1886, and Melbourne is home to approximately 3.8 million people compared to Metro Vancouver, close to 2.4 million. The 31 local government areas in metro Melbourne occupy approximately twice the space of Metro Vancouver’s 23 municipalities (see Fig. 1). The growth rate, 1.3–1.9% of each metro area’s population annually (in Melbourne, 79,000 from June 2009–June 2010; in Vancouver, an estimated 39,000 for the same time frame) (Colebatch, 2011a; Metro Vancouver, 2009), is driven by immigration (75–80% in Vancouver, 61% for Melbourne, from 2001 to 2006) (Australian Productivity Commission, 2010; Metro Vancouver, 2009). The populations in both are also aging: in Metro Vancouver, the population 65+ will be 16.2% by 2019. In Melbourne, the population over 60 will grow to nearly 20% by 2016 (Department of Planning, 2008a; Metro Vancouver, 2009).

In terms of urban redevelopment success following the post-industrial turn, the ‘Melbourne Miracle’ corresponded in time and effect with the ‘Vancouver Achievement’ of the 1990s: a new, highly liveable downtown brought life back to the middle of the donut city and along with it, the contagious excitement of exclusive, artsy, urban living (Fig. 2). Also shared is a rather shaky exuberance (amongst those able to ante up in the almighty real estate game) over astronomical rates of appreciation of inner city property values. Home prices in both cities reached unheard of peaks at the end of 2010, with prices up 11% in Metro Vancouver and more than 30% in Melbourne, since 2009 (British Columbia Real Estate Association, 2011; Real Estate Institute of Victoria, 2010). While prices have now leveled-off in both cities, they remain up to 60% higher in Vancouver and 43.4% higher in Melbourne, compared with 5 years ago (British Columbia Real Estate Association, 2011; Real Estate Institute of Victoria, 2012).

The cities are not identical twins in appearance, but they do have similar expressions, particularly in the neighborhoods most symbolizing the new creative class. In its downtown neighborhoods, Vancouver has been heralded as an image of the greatest urban experiment since the 1950s, and labelled “Futureville” in the Canadian urban context (Montgomery, 2006). Drawing upon the same experimental conditions, the high density, meticulously greened, mixed use streetscapes of Melbourne’s Southbank and South Yarra could be those of Vancouver’s Yaletown and Coal Harbor (Fig. 3). Melbourne’s bustling and historic Sydney Road, with its immigrant communities and small ethnic shops from Italy, Greece, and Turkey now thoroughly diluted by tattooed and under-appreciated Gen Y hipsters and their own commercial preferences, could be Vancouver’s Commercial Drive or South Main (Fig. 4). However, beyond those hip urban areas, suburbanites live in single family houses, drive their cars long hours and vast distances, and may not share such effusiveness for urbane cosmopolitanism.

And the suburbs are taking the lion’s share of growth. The City of Vancouver, where 37% of the population lived in strata-title condominium style housing in 2006 (Harris, 2011), is projected to continue absorbing 12% of the region’s growth through 2040; but suburban Surrey will remain the fastest growing and take 27% of the growth. In the Melbourne region, the population growth rate outside the core areas was 4.1% from 2001 to 2006, compared to 0.9% in the established core (Department of Planning, 2008b). In 2010–2011, population growth in Melbourne metropolitan (66,900 persons) surpassed the rate of growth in all other Australian cities, with some of Melbourne’s outer fringe suburbs, like Wyndham (at 7.8%), also the fastest growing in the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). In 2009–2010, about 68% of growth occurred more than 20 km from the center (Colebatch, 2011a).

At the same time, sea change is afoot in the suburban mentality of both cities. These are not your (Canadian or Australian) mother’s

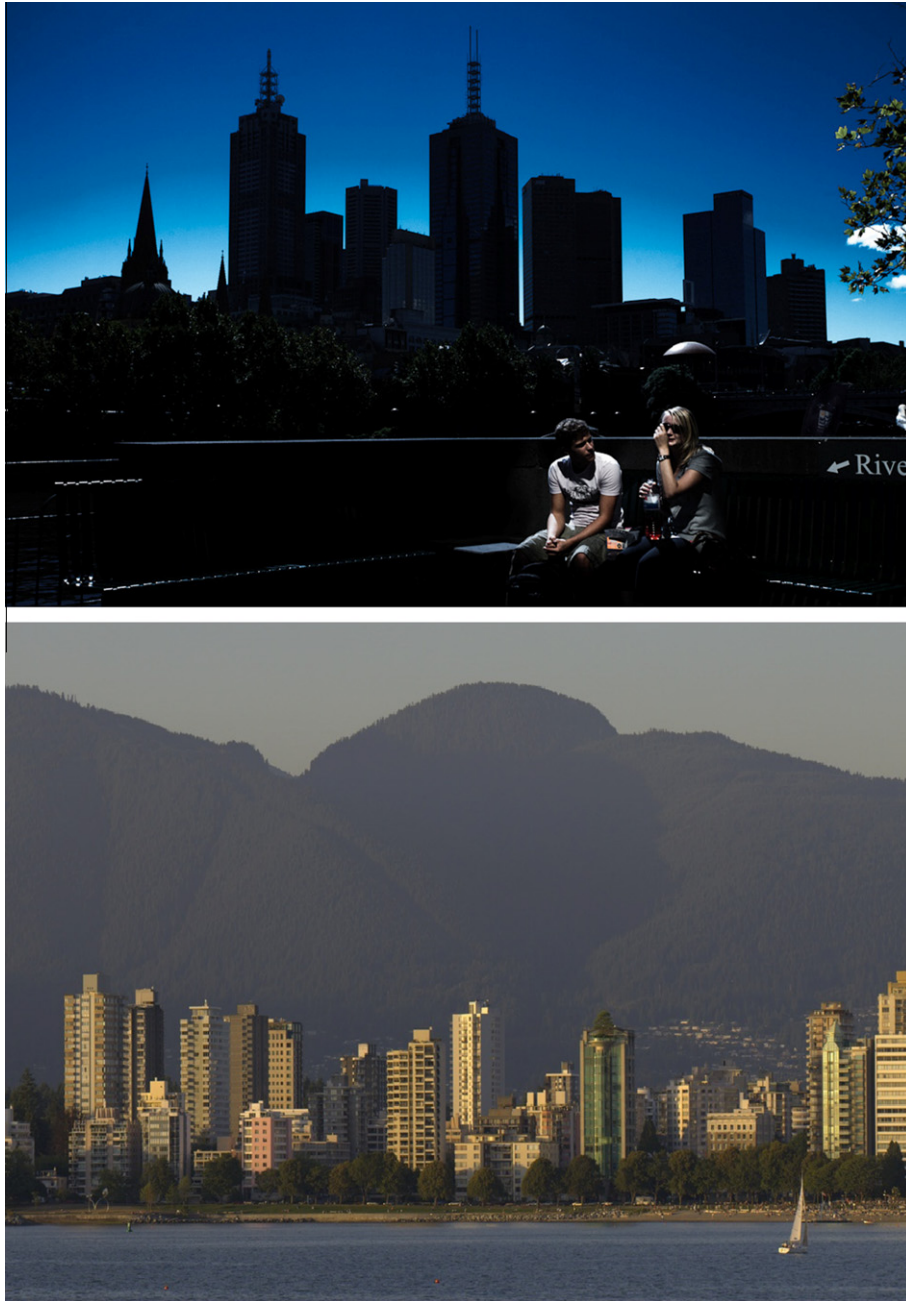


Fig. 2. Twin cities in successful downtown redevelopment: Melbourne and Vancouver skylines (photo credit: John Goldsmith).

quoted – the 1960s era public housing tower campuses; the trams of the same era, with steps and narrow doorways that prevent the entry of many; the cash only shops; the creepy Crown Casino, occupying a full city block on the banks of the Yarra River, sucking in all cars and pedestrians venturing into its forcefield; the King Street ‘gentlemen’s entertainment’ row of poker clubs and strip joints.

The perfect illustration of the duality of Melbourne urbanity would have to be the coffee. It is absolutely everywhere, and almost completely unfranchised; it is bleary-eyed dependency and a core social institution; it is precious luxury and banal work-a-day routine. How they manage to convince all the small businesses to purchase expensive espresso machines, learn to pull excellent shots, every time, all across the city, without specific, draconian legislation defies explanation. Barista training centers at the scale of Google server farms come to mind. Melburnians say simply:

businesses would go under if they didn’t serve a superb macchiato. As for Vancouver’s coffee culture, this essentially has been contracted out to a small number of large corporations, with business models that serve a caricature of liveable suburban or liveable urban lifestyles. The archetypal suburbanite has his Tim Horton’s. As for the urbanites, a colleague once proposed the ‘Starbucks Index,’ a measure of the area falling outside a 200 m radius of the nearest Starbucks outlet, beyond which Vancouverites’ sense of security diminishes drastically. In Melbourne, the big mermaid almost drowned, closing 70% of stores within a year of opening them in 2006. The occasional bad shot does exist, sure. But it’s always *coffee*. In Vancouver, venture beyond the oligopoly, and there are times when the coffee on offer ... is not.

There’s more to the café culture of Melbourne than the coffee, of course. Which leads to our second distinction. One could leave a



Fig. 3. Twin cities for the new urban liveability: Melbourne's Southbank and Vancouver's downtown South (photo credits: John Goldsmith, Kaizer Rangwala).

hip Melbourne café, like Seven Seeds in Carlton, in an alley off the University of Melbourne campus, which boasts an on-site coffee grove, without paying a dime – that is, 10 cents. Patrons breeze in, sit at a communal table, partake of the delicacies on offer, then rise to leave. There is a cash register. They hope you will stop. Both of us have had to catch ourselves more than once.

One becomes accustomed to being policed in this regard, in North America: policed to pay at stores and restaurants, policed on public transit, policed to behave in parks and public spaces. The simple Aussie practice of rounding prices, rather than extending the discomfort of the buyer–seller confrontation long enough to count pennies, is a civil and trust-inducing practice. It seems to lead to other kinds of impromptu one-on-one negotiations that Vancouverites do not dream of; the give and take reassures you that you are, indeed, all in this city together. We have fallen for the trick of feeling as if the whole foundation of our urbanism in North America is that we are not in this together, no way, no how. Or at least, we are winning to the extent that we can act as if this were true.

In an OECD (2011) survey conducted for the *Better Life Initiative* tool in which Australia, followed by Canada, tops the ranks, respondents were asked whether they had helped a stranger in the past month. Canada edges out Australia here for top score: 66% of respondents to Australia's 65% report having done this. Looking into this a bit, it seems likely that this Australian/Canadian distinction could not be measured in terms of exchange value alone. That is, in terms of the economic or dollar value of the 'help' given and received. The Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society operates 15 depots region-wide that together feed approximately 9000 people each week, and provides food to 16,000 others through aid to over 100 agencies. The society estimates that 40% of the individuals served are children.¹ The morning line ups outside the food banks are shocking to Australian visitors, because such queues do not exist in Australia. There are disadvantaged suburbs, and woeful neglect by

¹ The Greater Vancouver Foodbank Society's web address is <https://www.food-bank.bc.ca/>.



Fig. 4. Twin cities in reappropriated urban liveability: Melbourne's Sydney Road and Vancouver's South Main Street (photo credit: John Goldsmith).

mainstream Australians of the indigenous population, but nowhere is there need to line up for food. Accepting donated food from wholesalers and retailers, and redistributing it to charitable organizations rather than individuals directly, Foodbank Victoria provides food to 18,000 individuals on a weekly basis, statewide. Food distribution through charitable organization channels, rather than opening the doors to food depots to individuals, is operated and conceived by charitable and government social services as a “gateway service,” such that, as a policy goal at least, those who are hungry are also offered support by the state network of community health centers to meet further health, addiction or mental health care needs (Department of Health, Victoria, 2012; VicRelief Foodbank, 2010).

The City of Melbourne's 2010 StreetCount of homelessness found 1300 people living in various states of homelessness, and approximately 100 people sleeping rough in the city on the night of the count (City of Melbourne, 2011). The City of Vancouver found 1715 homeless people, with 421 of these unsheltered during its March 2010 count (City of Vancouver, 2010). Given the differ-

ence in population, comparing absolute numbers of the homeless is not so useful. More useful is to compare how well each city is doing in providing for the needs of its least well off residents. In Melbourne, less than 8% of the homeless are on the street, compared to the situation in Vancouver, where almost 25% are on the street – and this is following a significant investment in 2009–2010 in new shelters, an effort that cut the level of street homelessness in the city nearly in half compared to the 2008 count.

Vignettes and counter vignettes pile up until it becomes clear: it's the inequality, stupid! At the national level, in 2004, Canadians in the top 10% of the income distribution made 4.8 times as much as people in the lowest 10%, compared to a multiplier of only 2.8 in Australia. In the cities, the situation is much more dire. In metro Vancouver, in 2006, the top 10% made 10 times the income of the lowest 10%. In metro Melbourne in 2006, even when we consider the top 20%, a wider swath of better-offs, these people make 3.6 times the income of the lowest 20%. Most of the gap exists at the lower end of the income spectrum, because a comparison of

wage rates at the top 10% with the median income earner hovers around a factor of 2 for both countries. The difference in the gap persists across various demographic groups that might be expected to skew the numbers (young men, new immigrants, women) (LaRochelle-Côté & Dionne, 2009). This suggests that the inequality is driven by the minimum wage and the provision of social services in general. And this is where the difference that we perceive on the streets and in the suburbs of our cities runs deepest.

Minimum wage is set at the national level in Australia, adjusted on an annual basis following a review by the statutory authority, Fair Work Australia and in line with conditions set out in the National Employment Standards (Fair Work Australia, 2009). In July 2011, minimum wage increased to \$15.51 per hour, based on an equity argument that such a boost is “modest and affordable” (Fyfe, 2011). Australia’s and so, Melbourne’s minimum wage has risen 7.1% in real value since 2000 (Cresswell, 2011); during this time, minimum wage in BC was stagnant at \$8 per hour. In British Columbia, a move to increase minimum wage to \$10.25 (by May 2012) was one of the first announcements made by a new provincial government. While recognizing that minimum wage is lower in BC than in any Canadian province, the argument offered for the move makes not even a curtsy to equity, but hangs upon competitiveness, in which low wages are regarded as the key to economic competitiveness. Said Premier Clark about the increase: “Wages for workers must keep pace with the challenges that average British Columbians face, but at the same time our government recognizes businesses deserve stability and predictability . . .” (Shaw, 2011).

Research recently commissioned by the Australian Council of Trade Unions shows that, across all demographic groups, Australians thought the country had more evenly divided wealth than is the case, and expressed a preference to live in a country with more evenly divided wealth (Fyfe, 2011). They also thought that the minimum wage was nearly \$2 higher than it actually is. When told where the minimum wage does sit, 83% believed it should be higher (and 5% were opposed to this) (Empirica Research, 2011). This is to say that: for all appearances, if Melburnians had an accurate understanding of the level of inequality in the city, already low by Vancouver standards, they would not be willing to live with it or, at least, would not see it as a desirable state of affairs. Based on data from the Luxembourg Income Study, Canada edges out the United States for the most low income workers in 2004, with 1 in 4 workers making less than two-thirds the median earnings. For Australia, the figure was 11.4%.²

Where is Vancouver opening up the gap? Imagining a sustainable city region

Taking this situation into account, we can say that Australians, at least those surveyed, recognize the importance of equity, particularly for the worst off, and that this understanding is supported by governance structures that protect some measure of economic equity. Higher levels of equity also have beneficial spin-offs for the quality of urban life overall. Melbourne offers an exciting notion of what living in the city is for: phenomenal cultural institutions where one can connect with people from every walk of life, great public life, with an urban ‘scene’ of pop-up bars and small-scale live performance venues, high quality jobs seemingly aplenty,

an endlessly fascinating look and feel, where one can connect with the city’s history. At the same time, we cannot help but feel like the city has an antiquated notion of *whom* living in the city is for. High-density developments in inner Melbourne are expressly planned for: university students, senior citizens, foreign investors and fly-by-night itinerant professionals. That the city might also be for living, for good, throughout the life cycle, is a wager that Vancouver wins. Urbane, high quality living throughout the life cycle is a planning and policy concept that is yet to dawn on Melbourne planners. There is no primary school in the CBD, and apart from the bustling open-air Queen Victoria Produce Market, few places to buy fresh food daily; although catching up in this respect, there is a scarcity of some of the key services needed in daily life.

Part of Melbourne’s challenge here is the lack of an institution to engage in ‘metropolitan thinking’ or to put it into practice. There is no regional government to knit local municipalities together into the metropolitan area, as Vancouver has in the Metro Vancouver Regional Authority. The City of Melbourne will speak as if taking the entire metropolitan area into account. But it does not, neither in policy nor in vision. The Metro Vancouver regional government, and its regional growth strategy, permits each of the 23 local governments to articulate its own identity within the regional plan. The region is also a level at which ‘stretch goals’ can be created for sustainability policy, ones that many local governments are not ready to tackle, such as, notably, urban growth boundaries. In Vancouver, an Urban Containment Boundary (of about 800 sq. km, 28% of the region’s total land area) defines the urban footprint to exclude agricultural lands, major conservation areas, and rural areas not suitable for future urban development. In Melbourne, the Urban Growth Boundary, currently 2786 sq. km, is expanded by both conservative and social-democratic state politicians on a regular basis, on the premise of maintaining housing affordability and accommodating 5 years of projected growth. As a result, Vancouver’s growth boundary serves as a compact for development that is aligned with the preservation of agricultural land and open space. Meanwhile, in Melbourne, the state-established boundary serves as a suburban land reserve.

Another example of the value of Vancouver’s regional government for stretching sustainability aspirations, tabled in the latest round of regional planning, was inclusionary zoning for a percentage of all housing units to be affordable. It fell out, this time, but it will be back (three regional municipalities have adopted such measures independently; in Vancouver, 20% of new housing must be affordable housing).³ Transportation planning also captures efficiencies at the regional scale. In Vancouver, mayors representing all of the region’s municipalities form a mayors’ council which in 2011 voted for a gas tax and future property tax increases to fund public and private transportation system improvements; in the same breath, this council is lobbying for access to more provincial funding sources (Lee, 2011). In Melbourne, the state-managed integrated metropolitan public transit system, MetLink, may have some fresh insights into the need for a change to governance structures following its experience introducing the smartcard system ‘Myki’, which, now 5 years behind schedule and with a price tag over a billion dollars, is being adopted by tram-riding Melburnians only under duress (Gough, 2011; Lucas, 2011). The Myki debacle continues to sap Melbournians’ confidence in Metlink and successive state governments, with regular barriers at train stations due to IT system overloads, passenger mischarging and overcharging on a massive scale and, most puzzling

² The Luxembourg Income Study (<http://www.lisdatacenter.org/>) is a cross-national data center and web-based database management system. While more recent national comparative data are not available, low-income in Canada was stagnant between 2004 and 2009 based on the Low Income Measure and the Market Basket Measure, while unemployment grew almost one percentage point to 8.4% (Murphy, Zhang, & Dionne, 2012); in Australia, the most recent available data from 2005 to 2006 also show a rise in average real equalized disposable household income within the low-income group (ABS, 2009).

³ The three municipalities in the Vancouver region with inclusionary zoning policies are Vancouver, City of North Vancouver, and Surrey. There is wide variation in the interpretation and implementation of these policies. In Vancouver, the 20% policy requires units to be made available for affordable housing when new housing is built, but was created at a time when support was available from senior levels of government for construction and operations of the housing, which has become very scarce (City of Vancouver, 2011).

of all, an inability to handle 'one-off' ticket purchases, such that visitors to the city who wish to take a single trip must first purchase a \$6 credit-free Myki card, 'charge it' with a minimum \$10 credit and then wait 24 h for the credit to appear on the chip in the card.

The unresolved question about the proper beneficiaries of city life is also reflected in the relationships between citizens and their governments. There is something anemic about public participation in Melbourne and something blandly paternalistic about the citizen–government relationship. Here we see evidence of a different kind of gap opening up. Both regional and city governments in Vancouver are hitting a stride of comfort and expertise. Unprecedented levels of citizen engagement in long term planning and strategic initiatives take place at the city and metro-regional scales, from the Talk Green to Us website,⁴ Pechakucha events and other arts-enriched interactive public meetings, to the second annual Metro Vancouver Sustainability Congress⁵ and regular sustainability breakfast and lunch dialogs, more than 5 years running.

What passes for citizen engagement in Melbourne is either perfunctory – a hotlink inviting those interested to be notified of future involvement opportunities that seem never to materialize; a Future Melbourne Facebook page; or meticulously orchestrated, high-brow expert panel discussions at the gleaming BMW Edge theatre in Federation Square. In keeping with the patrician air, it is more than likely that the reason the expert interlocutors seem to know each other well and to be engaging in a long-standing disagreement is because they do, and have been engaging with one another ... at least since high school. In Vancouver, the hard lesson has been learned that putting a plan in place for how to engage broadly and comprehensively is the first problem that local government needs to address when considering change of almost any kind. In Melbourne, the tactic is more likely to be that of the back room hush-hush variety, conducted in the hope that the public does not catch wind. Often, nosy journalists do catch wind: in 2010, Melbourne's *The Age* revealed that officials in the then-state government had planned to manufacture a phoney public consultation process in order to provide justification for its predetermined stance to block a redevelopment proposal for a prominent heritage landmark, the Windsor Hotel (Millar, 2010). Such scandals lead to a situation in which attempts to engage citizens differently are met with hearty Aussie laughs by all but the most gullible.

These strained relations do not extend to those between government and the corporate sector. The City of Melbourne, given its situation as state capital and economic center, yet technically home to only about 100,000 residents, has a greater focus on business as opposed to citizen relations. Indeed, while residents of the City of Melbourne are entitled to vote for their local mayor and council, two joint owners or occupiers of any taxable business property have this entitlement. Yes, business votes count for two and citizen votes for one in Melbourne city elections (City of Melbourne Act, 2001). This rule does not apply in any of the other suburban cities that make up the Melbourne metropolitan area. In terms of securing business center status for Australia and the South Pacific, this strategy is quite successful. Whereas Melbourne could stand to take some pointers from Vancouver regarding full-spectrum downtown living, Vancouver could learn a thing or two from Melbourne about a working first downtown. Major corporate headquarters, like those of the NAB and ANZ Banks, both located in Melbourne's Docklands, meet the nation's highest green building standards (6 Star) and, despite rounds of downsizing and offshoring, employ 10,000 people. That is to say that the outcomes can be impressive, but the process is ominous for democratic participation in city life and planning.

A spirit of sustainability exists in Melbourne, certainly. Cloth shopping bags are an accessory nearly as ubiquitous as the swooping scarf. People take great pride in supporting local businesses and eschewing chain stores (and given the vast numbers and variety of independent businesses, it is a simple pleasure to do so). Water and energy-efficient devices are prominent in houses, supported by local programs designed to assist homeowners become eco-efficient, like Zero Carbon Moreland⁶ and CERES.⁷ One can quite readily obtain free advice on eco-efficient home renovations, energy efficient retrofits, and free stuff from LED lights for your bicycle helmet to bicycle repairs. Federal programs are or have been in place to subsidize insulation and solar panels on rooftops nationwide. These programs, however, all share an intended audience of home-owning individuals. As for policies or plans that invite citizens to imagine and take action toward a sustainable city in a shared context, and to consider common and distributed responsibilities toward a lighter footprint, those are taking place in Vancouver.⁸

All of this suggests divergent notions of what government and citizenship are for. Australia, of course, boasts the highest level of voter turnout amongst OECD countries (95%). Since 1925, this has been achieved under penalty of law, but compulsory voting has very high levels of public support, such that no political party dares to tamper with the rule. Preferential voting is the uncontroversial norm, and elections are held on Saturdays. Depending on one's affiliation, post-election parties or commiserations stretch long into the night, as groups huddle in pubs and yards, tracking the 'distribution of preferences'. Canadians are delinquent and cynical at the voting station, and as most recently demonstrated in BC, deeply suspicious of electoral reform aimed at moving away from the potentially undemocratic 'first-past-the-post' system.⁹

However, Canadian participation rates, measured by any other metric besides voter turnout, stand out against those of Australia and, indeed, other OECD countries. In a 2000 survey, 70% of Canadians surveyed considered joining an interest group to be a more effective way to achieve policy change than joining a political party (Howe & Northrup, 2002). Nearly 40% of Canadians claim membership in an organization that sometimes plays an advocacy role; 11% claim involvement in an interest group; and these figures are have risen over the past two decades (Young & Everitt, 2005). In Australia, the nature and extent of the 'democratic deficit' has been mapped by surveys asking people which aspects of democracy they think most important, and which they perceive to be performing well or poorly. Suggesting a different model of democracy is at work than the Canadian model, people nominated the honesty and integrity of politicians as among the most important issues – and problems – for Australian democracy, along with low levels of public confidence in taxation, legal and political equality and media diversity (Salvaris & Woolcock, 2010).

Conclusion

To return to our three cities of Melbourne and three cities of Vancouver, then, we can see a different set of outcomes with regard to the liveability contest and different prospects for sustain-

⁶ Information is available at: <http://www.mefl.com.au/get-involved/zero-carbon-moreland.html>.

⁷ Information on the CERES community environment centre and urban farm in Melbourne is available at: <http://www.ceres.org.au/>.

⁸ Particularly notable here is the City of Vancouver's Greenest City 2020 plan (<http://vancouver.ca/greenestcity/>).

⁹ The BC Citizens' Assembly for Electoral Reform convened representatives from every electoral district in the province throughout 2004 to study and then recommend the citizens' choice of a new electoral system for the province. The recommendation of the Assembly, documented in the Assembly's Technical Report ([http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/resources/TechReport\(full\).pdf](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/resources/TechReport(full).pdf)), was for an electoral system nearly identical to that used in Australia. This option was presented to the citizens of BC in referenda in 2005 and again in 2009. It failed narrowly.

⁴ Available at: <http://talkgreenvancouver.ca/>.

⁵ Information about the 2011 Sustainability Congress can be found at: <http://www.metrovancouver.org/region/congress/Pages/default.aspx>.

ability in the future. For the group with either fortunes or foot-holds, employed or employable, educated or educate-able, those who have a choice when it comes to where they wish to live, we have a split decision. The intricacies of this decision will be hashed out for years to come on the (web) pages of the OECD, the Economist, and the rest. There is good coffee and then there is good coffee, there is excitement and then there is culture, there is recreation and then there is leisure. These are questions of cultural and lifestyle preference that will occupy real estate, economic development, and tourism forecasters in both cities, continuing the rivalry. For the group which goes without, we have Melbourne with an intact equity argument in the public sphere, in the corridors of policy making and around private kitchen tables, and Vancouver where the poor are poorer and worse, few dare even speak of equity as a goal for public policy.

For the third city, the city intended for future generations, we think Vancouver has an edge because of the way in which the public imagination of the city is trending, inwards rather than outwards, but more than this because of the growing chorus of voices taking part in imagining the city. In other words, Vancouver may have the right governance rules and democratic habits to create a liveable and sustainable city, in the wrong national historical policy context. Melbourne, by contrast, has a better slope to the playing field for uniting liveability and sustainability, but a poor understanding of just who the key players need to be, and how to play the deliberative game of uniting those key players, that is, citizens and their governments. No amount of citizen participation in city and regional policy and planning can counter the impacts of low levels of support for workplace regulation and social security at the national and provincial levels. Honing in on, motivating, and channeling the power of citizens, local and regional governments, to find the connection between making their city liveable and making it sustainable is nonetheless essential.

There is a growing momentum toward emphasizing liveability and lifestyle value amongst cities around the world. Those cities, like Melbourne and Vancouver, that are leading the pack could take a stand if they dared to assert that liveability is not all that a city needs to strive for, and that, part and parcel of this, cities are not alone in the need to strive for sustainable liveability – urban development is key to national development. The lack of access to liveability for many in our cities is a concern that will never be addressed by values and directions that avoid taking a principled position on equity: big-picture urban planning requires big-picture thinking and action. Likewise, if we cannot muster the courage to think concertedly about the long-term future of our cities, not only in cities, but at provincial and federal scales too, we will miss the opportunity to innovate from within, rather than waiting for change to be imposed by external crisis.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2012.07.013>. These data include Google maps of the most important areas described in this article.

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