

## Growing pains

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### **A great city more troubled than it is cracked up to be**

IT REGULARLY tops surveys of the world's most liveable cities. Vancouver's combination of natural beauty and urban sophistication has drawn expatriates from far and wide. But some ordinary Vancouverites wonder whether their increasingly gritty city is worthy of all the accolades.

Nobody can take away its beautiful setting, on a deep harbour backed by British Columbia's coastal mountains. It enjoys the mildest climate in Canada. Far-sighted decisions by the city fathers have endowed downtown Vancouver with a wooded 400-hectare (1,000 acre) waterfront park and a long seaside walkway, and spared it a freeway slicing through the city centre. The presence of residential areas close by has prevented the downtown area from becoming a desert by night.

But many residents are angry at signs of decline in the quality of urban life. Some of the problems are the by-product of success. The city's population is only 600,000, but that of the urban area is 2m. That figure is expected to increase by 50% over the next quarter of a century. One consequence of growth is the highest property prices in Canada, with an average home costing C\$518,000 (\$466,000). That is forcing young families to distant suburbs, swelling traffic congestion.

**Critics claim the authorities have been slow to respond to the city's growth. Only now are suburban railways being built. Opponents worry that a C\$3 billion road-building plan by the provincial government threatens to reverse Vancouver's relative success in containing sprawl, and funnel thousands more cars into the city.**

But it is the once-pleasant downtown that causes most alarm. Homeless panhandlers yell at theatre-goers, while young addicts deal drugs on street corners. They spill out from the Downtown East Side, an area of decrepit boarding houses, sleazy bars and boarded-up shops infamous for the country's highest rates of poverty and drug addiction. Its ills have resisted decades of expensive government effort.

Four years ago, the voters swept out a conservative city council in favour of a left-of-centre civic party. The new council announced a different approach to drugs, involving harm reduction and treatment as well as enforcement. It set up North America's first safe heroin-injection site, and pressed the provincial government to house the homeless. But it was then overcome by bickering. Last autumn, the voters turned to a re-energised right.

The new mayor, Sam Sullivan, is having little more success than his predecessors. His most promising scheme is an attempt to rein in sprawl by increasing housing density in central areas. But on the crucial issues of drugs and crime, he has made little progress.

Mr Sullivan advocates a heroin maintenance and treatment programme for addicts, of the kind pioneered in Switzerland. This would reduce crime, he says, but it requires federal legislation to implement. He wants a community court to deal specifically with the mentally ill people and drug addicts who cause trouble on the downtown streets. But that would have to be set up by the

provincial government. If Vancouver is to continue to live up to its reputation as an urban paradise, it will need a city government with the power, as well as the will, to keep it that way.

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**Canada**

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