

Finland's gold medal celebration

It's now official: Finland is the best country in the world – at least according to *Newsweek's* first-ever country rankings, published in August. Having lived the better part of 18 years abroad I always knew that Finland was a pretty cool place to live. But number one in the world? Wow, great stuff!



Newsweek ranked 100 countries based on five criteria: education, health, quality of life, economic competitiveness and the political environment. Finland came out on top, followed by Switzerland, Sweden, Australia, Luxembourg, Norway, Canada, the Netherlands, Japan and Denmark. The US came in 11th place, Germany 12th, UK 14th, and France 16th. The bottom three included Cameroon, Nigeria and Burkina Faso.

The effort took several months. Advisers and experts who helped determine the rankings included many of the world's biggest brains in academia and consulting. The study is inevitably subjective and imperfect. That, however, did not diminish my joy when I received the news. I was elated, and who wouldn't be. It's not a bad thing to hear that your country is the world's best place to live.

Looking at the criteria, I'm not surprised that Finland got the gold medal. For a long time, we have ranked number one in education. Our healthcare system is functional, but by no means perfect, so it's no wonder we ranked only 17th in this category.

I have never had any qualms about the quality of life in Finland, and wasn't surprised when *Newsweek* ranked us fourth in this category. The infrastructure works, services are world class and there is a feeling of security. Parents don't have to worry about letting their kids take public transportation to school at an early age.

Competitiveness (or as *Newsweek* put it, "economic Dynamism"), a category in which Finland ranked eighth, has been a virtue for the country for many decades. An open economy is the only way a relatively small market can survive. The political environment (Finland ranked fifth in this category) is relatively comfortable even for those who live in it. Why? Because it is transparent and open.

There are other qualifications that should also be mentioned. Finns are honest and humble. Actually so much so that when the news broke about the rankings, it took only a few hours for one of my countrymen to question the result. According to him, the calculation formula used by *Newsweek* contained an error and consequently Switzerland should have been number one. How about that for honesty?

No matter how subjective the study is, it does tell us a few things about the world. As far as countries are concerned, smaller is often better. It takes less effort for smaller countries to improve their overall welfare.

Education is also a key factor in creating an equal, prosperous and functioning society.

Finland's status as a society virtually free of corruption does not hurt either – in case you were wondering, we did not send a thick brown envelope to *Newsweek*.

In 2008, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up a group of prominent experts to brainstorm Finland's brand; the delegation is led by entrepreneur extraordinaire, Jorma Ollila, who is currently chairman of the board at Nokia and Shell. I'm sure that this group, for one, was all smiles when they heard about the *Newsweek* rankings.

The ranking was great news for Finland. It was also a bit of an ego boost. We care about what others think about us, sometimes even too much. One thing is for sure: we will be enjoying this one for a while to come. ■

Alexander Stubb is Finland's minister of foreign affairs and proud of his country's accolades.