



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 56, No. 6

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, JUNE 1975

The Importance of the Individual

THE LIBERTY OF THE INDIVIDUAL to control his own conduct is the precious possession he enjoys in a democracy. It is to be interfered with only when necessary to protect the liberties and rights of other individuals or to safeguard society.

Individuals seek to find meaning and a sense of responsibility in their existence, but they are likely to feel, even in a democratic society, that they are losing their identity in an age of mass communications, mass production, mass culture and mass everything.

Canada, like many other countries, has entered a period in which the majority of its citizens have come to entertain new expectations about the things they should have a chance to do and the place they should rightfully occupy in planning their society.

We are moving into a new kind of world in which, as Edith Hamilton wrote in *The Greek Way to Western Civilization* (Mentor 1948): "It is not men's greed, nor their ambition, nor yet their machines; it is not even the removal of their ancient landmarks, that is filling our present world with turmoil and dissension, but our new vision of the individual's claim against the majority's claim."

Not so many centuries ago — and in totalitarian societies of the present century — an individual had no rights at all if a common purpose or a political objective conflicted.

Then a new idea arrived: that every human being had rights. Since then, every generation has tried in its own way to make the inner world of the individual fit into the ever-changing frame of the outer world, but it is difficult. As Sam Levenson said in his book *In One Era and Out the Other* (Simon & Schuster of Canada, Ltd., Markham, Ont., 1974): "I spent so many years of my life learning how to make ends meet. Now that I have the means, they have moved the ends farther apart."

Persons are unique

Back of every deed and behind every great movement there is an individual, a person existing, as the

dictionary puts it, "as a separate indivisible entity." He is unique, a never-repeated phenomenon, acting and feeling in a way peculiar to himself. He is a person who has resolved: I will walk on my own feet; I will work with my own hands; I will speak with my own mind.

Practical individuality is attained when we have the widest possible latitude of personal choice and action consistent with the claims of living in society with others. H. G. Wells, novelist, social prophet and humanizer of knowledge, said this clearly: "We are not ourselves only; we are also part of human experience and thought."

Though he lives in a world of three and three quarter billion other persons, the individual wishes to learn his distinctive place in his environment, to study, to reason, and to decide for himself where he stands on all subjects affecting his life and actions.

Canada offers a wide view

Canada, celebrating this year her 108th anniversary as a confederated nation, offers every citizen the opportunity to take a wide view of the possibilities she offers for everyone to be his best self.

A nation is not a statistical aggregate of persons, but a union of them sufficient for the purposes of life.

Individual living and living in society are not incompatible, but they require flexibility in adjustment. Our civilization is based on the idea of *the person in society*. That is opposed to either complete individualism or collectivism.

Long ago, in what people sometimes think of as a golden age, there may have been a period when men and women were completely independent, responsible to no one but themselves. However, the self-sufficing person, not relying on others for aid or support, convinced that what he believes and does concerns no one else, is a concept without validity in modern civilization.

The 20th century individual has at times to submerge his personal wishes, to co-operate with others for common ends and to contribute his service and

his special qualities to society. Darwin noted that success in the game of life, and therefore survival, is "often most promoted by mutual assistance."

We are not only individuals but social animals in the sense that we could not exist at all without being in this relationship to one another. A society, said Arnold J. Toynbee, is a product of the relations between individuals.

By living in society we lose some of our independence, but there is a difference between voluntary conformity in behaviour and forced conformity in thought. When we contribute our ideas of our own accord toward solution of community problems, we tie our minds to those of others in bonds of respect and trust.

A person may retain his identity as an individual while being a citizen of the world. There are many occasions for the individual to say: "I am important because I am part of my family, church, university, association and nation."

The "I" that an individual is today is the product of all that has gone on between him and other human beings all his life. He is responsible for heeding the laws that apply to the whole of which he is part. He cannot, as might be said today, enjoy all the fringe benefits without joining the union.

When an individual seeks to do his share in society, he finds himself in the midst of organizations of massive size and complexity. We live in a world of government and business that seems to be wholly committed to bigness and consolidation. No person, from workman to president of a firm, is a person working alone. He is part of an organization, contributing his part, taking or giving instructions, working with others.

Society and the person

The priority of the individual is unchallenged in a truly democratic society. The conviction behind the ideals of democracy is that the value of all human arrangements must be measured by what they do to enhance the life of the individual.

However, the population of Canada is about twenty-three million, and twenty-three million individualists can create a lot of chaos. It is, then, necessary to give some guidance to individuals so that the urge of their individuality meshes with the constructive ambitions of the nation.

What we need in a democratic country are individuals who live responsibly with their fellows while following standards they have set for themselves.

Every person has unique powers that must not be melted down in the collectivist pot of a managed society. If organized as a single unit directed by a general staff at Ottawa or as a complex of units with supervisors in the provincial capitals, Canadians would develop a herd complex. The monolithic state might not be a genial shelter except for the weak and the incompetent.

Despite differences of opinion on many things, there are items in our culture upon which all members of our society agree. These form the culture pattern within which individuals may develop. They are the roof under which every person may pursue his purpose in peace and in safety and in harmony.

It is futile to call upon governments to make people happy. All that the State can do is provide the conditions in which individuals can set about making themselves happy. The individual needs stable government to provide the economic and legal framework within which he can create and achieve and make his maximum contribution to society. On the other hand, the government needs the initiative, skills and intelligent support of the individual if it is to meet the rising expectations of the people it serves.

Qualities of individuality

Even though we live under the most ideal conditions of democratic individuality we should not expect everyone else to feel toward us the tender love and profound respect which we feel toward ourselves.

One's ego is the part of his psychic apparatus that experiences and reacts to the outside world and thus mediates between primitive drives and the demands of the social environment. Those people are unfortunate who develop the habit of valuing everything only in reference to their personal interest.

Nothing is so dull as to be encased in self. A person who lives only for himself runs the risk of being bored to death with the repetition of his own views and interests. The person who can move his thoughts and hopes to something transcending self can expand his horizon so as to find new interests.

Sigmund Freud, known as the inventor of psychoanalysis, held the opinion that a child brings into the world an unorganized chaotic mentality called the *id*, the sole aim of which is the gratification of all needs, the alleviation of hunger, self-preservation, and love, the preservation of the species. As the child grows older the part of the *id* which comes in contact with the environment through the senses learns to know the inexorable reality of the outer world and becomes modified into what Freud calls the *ego*.

This contact of the inner person with the outer world is essential to efficient living.

There is no harm in thinking of yourself as the centre of the universe so long as you remember that there are as many other centres as there are men, women, children and other thinking creatures, and that all are entitled to make the best they can of their lives.

This is very far from the egocentricism of the rooster in Edmond Rostand's play. He believed that the sun could not rise without his crowing. Anyone is likely to slip into this mood on occasion. Xerxes, king of Persia, was very successful when it came to accomplishing things, but he was an egotist. Upon receiving a report from his advisers he is reported to have said:

“There is somewhat of wisdom, but not much, in thy suggestions: had there been more, the notions would first have occurred to me.”

We must make room for the minds and ideas of other persons. A country that seeks, as Canada does, to be a place whose people have not only space in which to live but space for their minds to expand, needs citizens who can bear working alongside other people who do or say unusual things.

He is a generous and intelligent individual who gives people scope to express themselves in word and action. He is an excellent person who asks other people when discussing a project: “How does it look from where you stand?”, thus recognizing their individuality and displaying his broadminded belief that there is a good deal to be said on both sides of most questions. Without pollen from other minds, no person can have a crop of vigorous seedlings in his own.

There are people who brush aside a wise saying of a person merely because he is not of their political or religious persuasion. The individual seeking to be great will like what is excellent, no matter whose it is. He will examine the theories of others, discuss them, lay them alongside his own ideas, decide upon one that is practical and desirable, and carry it into execution with prudence and energy.

Who am I?

One of the saddest symptoms associated with the feeling of lack of individuality is the sensation of loss of identity. An impressionable person may suffer distress because he has no clear conception of what he is, why he is here, where he is going, and what, if anything, he can do about it.

The individual needs the courage and backbone to be what he is. The maxim on a temple wall at Delphi: *Know Thyself*, is as applicable today as on the day the Greeks inscribed it there.

A person should know his ability, what he is best fitted for, his limitations, and his aspirations. This enables him to appraise his own worth honestly. There is nothing more effective in helping a person through life and in protecting him from disastrous actions than a knowledge of his characteristic strengths and weaknesses.

The effective individual chooses his goals, plans his future and maintains the unity and coherence of his life. Nearly everyone has a desire for distinction of one sort or another. He is inclined to hope, and then to believe, that nature has given him something peculiar to himself. He wants to stand out from the crowd as a person.

Some go to great lengths to assert their identity in the face of great difficulty. James Smithson was the illegitimate son of parents who were of royal blood. Spurned by society, he wrote: “My name shall live in the memory of men when the titles of the Northumberland and the Percys are extinct and forgotten.” He bequeathed a half million dollars to the United States for the establishment of an institution for the world-

wide collection and diffusion of knowledge. His trust has been faithfully executed over the years by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

No person is exclusively this or that: the person in business has something of the poet in him or he is not enjoying life, while the poet has some business sense in him or he would not make a living. Dante's individual desires were frustrated: disappointed in love, he went into politics, fell into disfavour, and was exiled. Yet in losing his birthright in his native city Dante won the citizenship of the world, for in exile he found his life-work in creating the epic poem *Divine Comedy*.

Environment undoubtedly plays the main part in determining whether the capabilities of a man or a woman are allowed to develop, but the environment alone will never *create* such capabilities. The incentive and the drive arise and develop within the individual, and he needs above all a sense of direction.

A determined attitude is necessary if he is to overcome difficulties and keep injurious thoughts under control. A hint was given to those who seek wholesome individuality by an emperor-philosopher: “Begin the morning by saying ‘I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful and of the bad that it is ugly. . . I cannot be injured by any of them for no one can fix on me what is ugly.’ ”

It is not enough to be against something. There is not much reward in being an individual unless one's individuality is directed toward a constructive purpose. Many persons are always on the go, but do not know where they are going. Some have the misguided idea that it is expressing individuality to drive the wrong way on a one-way street.

Dependence and freedom

As population increases and the pace of life quickens everyone becomes more dependent upon more people in increasingly intricate ways. This causes disturbing thoughts to arise of personal inadequacy. As Professor Archie J. Bahm, of the University of New Mexico, wrote in an essay in *Journal of Thought*: “When an individual is interdependent with so many multitudes of others in megalopolitan and global living, the amount which others depend on him seems minuscule [very small] compared with the amount of his dependence upon so many of them.”

The reaction “There's nothing I can do that will matter” is something for every individual to avoid. Being independent does not mean being indifferent or neutral on matters of private or public interest. Every movement that has become great, and every advance made in civilization, started with an individual and was carried to completion by innumerable individuals expressing their individuality in co-operative action.

Neutrality, meaning neither one thing nor the other, is not always a virtue. When one abstains from something when one should be actively interested, neutrality

is unfair to both the neutral person and society. There is a time to stand up, to take sides, to be heard, to exert influence, to do something.

The individual has urges that press him to fight against oblivion. He wishes to be favourably known during his lifetime and to be remembered with pleasure. To accomplish this he seeks opportunities to display his abilities, but he must be willing to endure some inconvenience in the process.

Every individual, no matter what his status, is a chip on a historical wave, but some individuals, at some critical moment, play a decisive role in redirecting the wave.

Individual happiness

Individual happiness includes the satisfaction which can come only through the full development and utilization of one's faculties. An individual is constantly expanding and refining his ideas, learning to cope with the natural and extraordinary experiences of his life.

Individuality presupposes maturity. It shows itself in responsibility and independence, a giving rather than a receiving attitude, co-operativeness, gentleness and goodwill, flexibility and adaptability. It includes reaching a balance between the claims of the individual and those of his society, and the process of maturation from the idealism of adolescence to the responsibilities of adult citizenship.

Maturity implies an ability to walk alone, with enough self-confidence to run risks if they seem, after careful thought, to be worth running. The individual who is living fully has found his way from his mother's shielding arms and is making his way among people. He has entered consciously into the human enterprise.

How far he succeeds in living happily and fruitfully will depend upon how successfully he uses his mind. It is his imagination of what might be that gives him the incentive to progress.

Do not envy the poet because so many delightful things happened to him, but try to emulate his power of imagination which was capable of turning fairly common experiences into something beautiful. Don Quixote is the symbol of imagination contrasted with reality: he represents the eternal warfare between drabness and excellence. But his experience teaches us that imagination must function within the scope of data and common sense.

Being individual means being different from the people who stand around waiting to see what will happen to them next. The individual knows that he himself can make things happen.

The notion that no effective change for the better can be brought about in one's life or in society until millions of people have decided upon it by a national referendum is a rationalization dear to the lazy-minded. The first step toward one's idea of utopia is an individual act, like that of the person who first rubbed two sticks together and made a fire.

Individual initiative is based upon the feeling of something that needs to be done, and it expresses itself through experiment and effective action.

The proficient individual has dignity that grows out of self-respect. He is modest in his assertion of his own opinion and agreeable in his respect for that of others. He makes a conscious effort to improve his human relations. In a time when we have an abundance of technical efficiency in our lives and man is giving place to management we are in danger of losing the human contacts with people that make life interesting and rewarding.

An individual cannot become a cultivated person by being nice only to important people: that is, to those from whom he expects something or other. No matter how talented he may be, no matter how "independent" he may be, he cannot accomplish greatly without the aid of his fellow men. He must consider the rights, opinions, and reactions of people around him. He may be a great deal cleverer than they are, but he does not tell them so.

An individual's philosophy

One thing needed in this age is to rediscover and reassert our sense of values.

A philosophy for living does not grow out of analysing words minutely but of putting ideas together in the pursuit of wisdom. A living philosophy will include a maturing mind, a ripening character, a higher integration of all one's powers in a social personality, a larger capacity for intellectual interests and emotional enjoyments and a continual setting of new goals. To be an excellent individual is to do what may be disagreeable if one ought to do it and the will not to do what is agreeable if one ought not to do it.

There are undoubtedly ups and downs to this matter of being an individual. Being individual means finding within yourself centres of strength which will enable you to stand despite the confusion and bewilderment around you; to play all the parts that are assigned to you at various times, and to grace all of them.

What is greatness in an individual? Renaissance Man was great. In his vocation he was uncompromisingly professional. He believed that people possess intrinsic ethical and intellectual worth. He awakened the interest of his countrymen in mankind's past achievements, encouraged education, and fostered culture. He taught that love of the things of the intellect and the imagination are worthy for their own sake. He sought to reconcile pagan ideas with the golden rule, and ancient ways with developing progress. He urged every one who shared his interests not only to rediscover old and forgotten causes of enjoyment but to seek fresh sources.

People today are crying out to be given identity and to be lifted individually from the great faceless mass. It is the individual that matters, not to himself alone but to the nation.