



# Royal Bank Letter

Published by Royal Bank of Canada

Vol. 76 No. 3

May/June 1995

## *The Duty of Civility*

*Civility means a great deal more than just being nice to one another; it is the lubricant that keeps a society running smoothly. So vital is it, in fact, that some philosophers say that we have a duty to act civilly — especially here in Canada, where we must live with diversity...*

On first examination, a person would never guess how important civility is to human affairs. One dictionary writes it off as mere good manners. Another says that the word refers especially to cold and formal politeness. Yet another suggests that it is little more than acting in a way that is not outrageously rude.

By these standards, one might conclude that civility is best exemplified by the polished hypocrisy of a diplomat in an unfriendly capital or the supercilious correctness of a waiter in a pricey Paris restaurant. But when you consider it in practice, you realize that the lexicographers have settled for woefully incomplete definitions. It is as though they had wrestled long and hard with the immense scope and weight of the concept, and given up in their efforts to pin it down.

Instead of exploring the crucial role of civility in social and political life, the lexicographers have concentrated on how it carries less personal warmth than other social graces. So it often does: but if civil men and women tend to be reserved, it is because they scrupulously avoid intruding into or interfering with other people's business. Another factor that tends to render their manner less than familiar is that civility is usually directed towards people one hardly knows or does not know at all.

As we can see from looking at the first part of the word, civility is a form of public, as opposed to private, behaviour. The adjective "civil" refers to citizenship, so that civility, or the lack of it, governs the approach of one citizen to the rest of the citizenry. Its

presence or absence has a profound effect on the character of any society. It goes a long way towards making the difference between a pleasant and a not-so-pleasant place to live.

The difficulty in bringing it into focus seems to lie in thinking of it as a single personal quality like politeness, whereas it is actually an amalgam of several such qualities. True, it begins with the inculcation and exercise of good manners, but not just any kind of manners, certainly not the snobbish kind designed to shut people out of one's own circle or to assert one's presumed superiority. The best manners, it has been said, are tailored to the occasion and the recipients. The key to civility is in trying to make everyone you encounter day-by-day feel at ease.

In any case, manners are only the most visible manifestation of what is less of a code of conduct than a spirit. That spirit encompasses consideration, tact, good humour, and respect for others' feelings and rights. Perhaps the one word that comes closest to summing it up is "obliging." It is a variation on the golden rule, urging that you treat everyone as decently and considerately as you would like to be treated yourself.

We may be better able to grasp what it is all about by putting aside the dictionaries and turning to a fanciful example. The celebrated 18th century English preacher Richard Cecil told the story of two goats who met on a bridge which was too narrow for either to pass or turn back. When one goat lay down to let the other walk over him, civility was born.

Such self-effacement calls for self-restraint; and it is at this point that we can see that the link between civility and civilization is more than just etymological. People might think of a civilized community as one in which there is a refined culture. Not necessarily; first and foremost it is one in which the mass of people subdue their selfish instincts in favour of the common wellbeing.

Think of it in the negative: in an uncivilized society, the stronger and more cunning individuals pursue their own impulses and desires to the limit, riding roughshod over their weaker fellows. In contrast,

civilized societies live by a set of customs and laws which, imperfect though they may be, are fundamentally designed to strike a rough balance between the stronger and the weaker. The laws themselves,

however, are less important than a public disposition to obey them, and this stems largely from the spirit of civility.

The democratic system presupposes civil conduct in our courts and elected bodies. More generally, civility calls upon us to make an effort to see the other person's point of view, and to try to resolve differences democratically. It allows us to engage in dialogues with those whose ideas we oppose in a non-aggressive fashion. This leads to attempts to reconcile disagreements by seeking and moving towards common ground.

That great expert on manners, Lord Chesterfield, once remarked that "mutual complaisances, attentions, and sacrifices of little conveniences" are at the heart of an "implied contract" among civilized people. In a country like Canada, people on the whole abide by a tacit agreement to hold back from doing as they please if it is in opposition to what is deemed best for the whole society.

"What I love about Canada is its civility," the famed American-born urbanologist Jane Jacobs once said. "There's always a willingness to talk things out with reasonable politeness." And indeed Canadians have long been noted for their civil ways, to the point where it has become something of a caricature. When you step on a Canadian's toes, an American comedian once observed, *he* apologizes. No doubt the public politeness of Canadians is exaggerated in foreign eyes, but the fact remains that it has helped them to make the compromises necessary to build an enviable nation out of competing regional and cultural interests with a minimum of rancour and strife.

The question is: is civility slipping away from us? In an article in the University of Toronto Magazine based on his book *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism*, Mark Kingwell, assistant professor of philosophy at Scarborough College, described returning to Toronto after a number of years abroad to witness "scuffles on sidewalks, brutal exchanges on the bus, people losing their cool in the Eaton Centre." In his absence, Canadian politics had also grown more rough and nasty, leading him to worry that "we are in danger of losing our sense that civility matters. [It] is an increasingly fragile aspect of our national life, a virtue in danger of going out of style permanently."

If civility really is in danger of going out of style, it is largely because of what is now *in* style in our popular culture. In the name of personal freedom, people here have long since accepted that anything goes, as long as it is not clearly identified as a criminal offence. This is partly a reaction to traditional social strictures which stifled individual expression and helped to maintain the domination of elites in our society. Be that as it may, the ethos of "letting it all hang out" has dealt a heavy blow to civility, because it is just the opposite of self-restraint.

When it started in the 1960s, one of the guiding notions of the social liberation movement was that people should give vent to their feelings. That in itself is good, but it seems to have been misinterpreted by the entertainment media, which can be expected to influence the attitude of the public at large.

They seized upon it to confront the public with wild demonstrations of rage, an emotion that makes for spectacular action in movies, television and stage plays. In a typical scene, the hero of a movie cannot get what he wants in a restaurant, so he overturns the table and sends the plates and glasses flying. The audience laughs indulgently. The underlying message is that it is all right — even glamorous — to relieve your frustrations by smashing things and generally raising hell.

Sheer rudeness, too, has acquired a certain chic. In recent years the media have raised boorishness to an art form. The hip heroes of movies today deliver gratuitous put-downs to ridicule and belittle anyone who gets in their way. Bad manners, apparently, make a saleable commodity. Television situation comedies wallow in vulgarity, stand-up comedians base their acts on insults to their audiences, and talk show hosts become rich and famous by snarling at callers and hectoring guests.

*Building an enviable  
nation on a  
foundation of  
civility*

It was a sad day for civility when a journalist first wrote approvingly about somebody being "outspoken." Now everybody, it seems, is speaking out vehemently on the premise that the more stridently you shout, the more attention your cause will receive. In public affairs, the rallying-cry of the times seems to be "in your face!" TV news shows feature a steady parade of advocates and demonstrators demanding whatever they want, regardless of how their demands fit in with public priorities. If extra-parliamentary politics is lacking in reason and grace, do not look to parliaments for a better example. Telecasts from our elected assemblies reveal the spectacle of members bumptiously grinding their particular axes to a cacophony of juvenile jeers.

The traditional admonition to "keep a civil tongue in your head" appears already to be out of fashion. From the schoolyard to the office, what used to be called bad language has become standard form. Much of it is simple verbal laziness, using expletives to avoid the search for words that precisely convey what the speaker is thinking. But crude language has not entirely lost its power to insult and intimidate. It remains a medium of anger and scorn, and it is often used as a bludgeon to beat down the expression of other people's views.

The old civil virtue of minding one's own business has also been taking a beating. Civility demands that you graciously let others go their own way and refrain from sitting in judgment on them. In recent years, many people have taken it upon themselves to tell other people what they may or may not do, over and above anything required by law or public decency. Civility implies a kind of partnership in the business of getting along in life; this behavioural bullying is not the act of a partner, but of a superior.

As if all this were not enough of an assault on the Canadian tradition of civility, intellectual commentators have advanced the theory that it somehow saps our vital juices. To them, our mild-mannered ways are a source of embarrassment in the cultural capitals they admire. Our stereotypical niceness contributes to another stereotype: that Canadians — English-speaking Canadians, at least — are irredeemably dull and plodding. Reserve and reticence, once considered admirable traits, are now viewed as evidence that we are too deferential for our own good.

*Are we losing  
'moral virility'  
by being  
so darn polite?*

A magazine columnist recently linked Canadian civility to "a loss of moral virility." Canadians, she wrote, "show the conviction of dead fish most of the time..." She made these statements in aid of a particular point, but they were typical of the school of thought that suggests that we need less civility rather than more of it. The theory is that, under what she called "yoke of civility," we have become rather gutless when it comes to standing up for our rights.

This is not quite true, any more than it is true that English-speaking Canadians are insuperably lacking in verve and passion. A look at the Canadian media on any given day will demonstrate that we are actually

*Where there is  
civility, issues  
are not resolved  
by shouting  
others down*

a disputatious lot, not at all behind-hand in debating political and social issues and making claims on behalf of our various groups. As for our reputation for sheep-like tameness, we might

sometimes wish we were tamer. Historically, we have had our share of civil disorder. In recent years riots have erupted in Canadian cities for as little reason as a local team losing — or winning — a sports trophy.

For all that, as Mark Kingwell writes, "citizenship as civility is a notion that actually exists in this country" — albeit precariously. As Canadians pursue their experiment in ever-increasing multiculturalism, that notion needs to be reinforced. According to Kingwell, "civility is basic to political life in a pluralistic society because it governs the continuing dialogue that makes such a society possible.... Properly understood, civility may provide us with the most coherent, and most progressive, characterization of social cohesion that we are likely to find."

So far in our history, civility has served us well. Injustices and inequities have been steadily righted within its framework. It is, however, an unfortunate fact of democratic life that some injustices and inequities will always exist, if only because new ones are likely to arise in the process of getting rid of old ones; they are thrown up by the inevitable march of change. It might be argued that we can get rid of them more quickly if those affected by them were less patient and accommodating, more willing to resort to confrontation. But that runs the risk of civil disorder, which does no one any good.

Civility does not preclude intense debate, nor does it lead us to back down from principles that really matter. It only means that we conduct our debates



and defend our principles in an atmosphere of reasonableness and courtesy. Where there is civility in discourse, differences can be examined intelligently. They are not resolved by the unfair criterion of which party is able to shout the other down.

According to the modern American philosopher John Rawls, civility is nothing less than a duty among citizens of a democracy. The system is inherently made up of disparate groups with their own interests to promote or protect. "Even with the best of intentions their opinions of justice are bound to clash," Rawls commented. Therefore the competing parties "must make some concessions to one another to operate a constitutional regime."

In his book *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls stated that citizens are obliged to act in good faith, and to assume good faith on the part of others until clear proof emerges to the contrary. They must recognize, in effect, that the system cannot meet everybody's claims at once and accept that at times they will be on the losing side.

He wrote: "... We have a natural duty of civility not to invoke the faults of social arrangements as a too ready excuse for not complying with them, nor to

*Good manners  
can give a  
powerful boost to  
practical success*

exploit inevitable loopholes in the rules to advance our interest. The duty of civility imposes a due acceptance of the defects of institutions and a certain restraint in taking advantage of them.

Without some recognition of this duty mutual trust and confidence is liable to break down."

The lofty level of constitutional democracy may seem a far cry from the dinner table at home, where we train — or neglect to train — our children in basic good manners. Manners can only be adopted through example; they cannot be imposed. Parents who are not in the habit of using polite expressions such as please and excuse me cannot expect their children to suddenly become paragons of decorum in outside company. A foul-mouthed father or mother will develop foul-mouthed children. Adults who are not willing to give a little to accommodate others or accept their faults will find the same attitudes reflected in their progeny.

To the German philosopher Johann Kaspar Spurzheim, the manners taught to children should include "the whole circle of charities which spring from the consciousness of what is due to their fellow

human beings." It all adds up to the old-fashioned concept of "good breeding," which has been described as "benevolence in trifles, and the preference of others to ourselves in the daily occurrences of life."

Though there should be no incentive to train young people in civility other than making them into good human beings, the fact is that good breeding does have its practical benefits. The worldly Lord Chesterfield called it "the result of much good sense," in which a little self-denial is practised for the sake of others "with a view to obtain the same indulgence from them."

The crassest motive for civility is that it can be a powerful aid to occupational success. Whether we are selling goods or services or simply our own personalities, it pays to have a winning manner. The leader in business or public service today is the one who can make other people want to work for him or her, and that requires the sort of consideration that fosters good feelings on both sides.

But there is a deeper degree of success that comes from being at peace with oneself. These days, many people's problems are said to be due to a lack of self-esteem. Good manners build self-confidence, because people who have them can be reasonably sure that wherever they go, they will be accepted. People who treat other people nicely stand to be treated nicely by them. By making others feel good, they feel good about themselves.

This exchange of pleasant feelings plays a large part in making a community or a country a good place to live. While civility is a bonding agent in societies everywhere, the Canadian society, in its pluralism, needs it more than most. It is nothing to be ashamed of. We should not be swayed by arguments that we are not tough or assertive or abrasive enough for this hard old world. If we have the reputation of being the naïve boy scouts of the world, so be it. There are worse reputations to have; boy scouts, after all, go about doing good.

At the same time, we Canadians have nothing to be smug about. In our laxity in maintaining our traditional standards of polite behaviour, we have indeed become less civil — and thereby less civilized. Canadian parents and others who have an influence on the young should make conscious efforts to instil civility in the emerging generation at a time when it is being bombarded with bad examples. Far from being embarrassed by it, we should nurture it as a feature of our national identity and indeed a matter of national pride.

