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The Prize of Citizenship

Citizenship in a democratic state is the product of a long and agonizing struggle. It continues to call for effort among those who possess it today. Its benefits should never be taken for granted. It is nothing less than what makes a person free...

As Canadians mark the 50th anniversary of the Act of Parliament that gave them a citizenship of their own, they might consider just how lucky they are to have it. For to be a fully operational citizen of a democratic nation is a privilege that has been granted to relatively few in all of history; indeed, it is rare enough even today.

Through the first few thousand years of human existence, the person we now call a citizen was nowhere in evidence. People banded together for mutual support in groups that came to be dominated by their strongest and most cunning members. There was no question of popular participation in decision-making or the rule of the majority. Anyone who disputed the policies of a ruler might be tortured or put to death.

Citizenship had to wait for the advent of civilization, with which it is intertwined. To become citizens, and to be accepted as such, humans had to rise out of the darkness of barbarism, in which force was the sole determinant of societal affairs. The dawn of civilization brought an end, however temporarily, to the law of the jungle, by which the stronger always lord it over the weaker. The genius of democracy, the conceptual garden from which citizenship grows, is that it gives political strength to everyone who chooses to participate in it actively.

It was not until the 5th century B.C. that the first glimmerings of democracy began to appear in the newly civilized city states of Greece, particularly Athens. There a succession of enlightened ex-rulers gradually handed over power to the people — but not to all the people. In the vaunted cradle of democracy, citizen-

ship was nothing like the generalized status we in the western world now enjoy.

It was restricted to male property-owners whose parents on both sides had been born in Athens. The women, immigrants and slave labourers who formed the bulk of the population had no formal say in how the state would be run, or by whom.

For all their blinkered view of the qualifications for citizenship, the Athenians did have a firm grasp of its meaning. Democracy stemmed from a philosophy of fairness: if citizens were called upon to support the state, they should in fairness have control over the conduct of that state.

In an autocracy, ordinary people were expected to obey the laws, to pay taxes, and to be available when called upon for military service. They did not necessarily receive anything in return for their efforts on behalf of the state. In a democracy, those paying for, and fighting for, the state were granted their just rewards in something intangible and yet priceless, namely individual liberty. Liberty is fully appreciated only by those who are deprived of it, as millions still are in the world today.

It is no accident that the era of greatness in ancient Greece coincided with the era of democracy. Philosophy and the arts flourished because, with the citizens in control of things, the more creative among them felt free to express themselves in ways that might have been dangerous in an autocracy. In the dictatorships that exist in our own times, independent thinkers and artists continue to suffer brutal repression. Freedom of expression is one of the great overlooked benefits of

citizenship in a democratic state.

The philosophers who abounded in ancient Athens thought long and hard about the system of government under which they found themselves. They broadly agreed that democracy is a free exchange of obligations between the state and the citizen: The state helps to support the citizen, and the citizen helps to support the state.

The aptly named Democritus declared that the welfare of the state and the welfare of the citizen were inseparable. Therefore the first concern of the dutiful citizen should be the welfare of the state. Democritus wrote that "a well-administered state is our greatest safeguard.... When the state is in healthy condition, all things prosper; when it is corrupt, all things go to ruin."

Since it is the nature of a democratic state never to stand still, the great Socrates was convinced that it was the duty of all citizens to work towards its improvement. He put his theory into practice by mercilessly criticizing the Athenian government. His political activity drew him a death sentence on a trumped-up charge of corrupting youth.

While awaiting execution, Socrates declined an offer from his friends to organize an escape and spirit him

away to another country. He explained that, if he fled, he would be weakening the state by breaking its law. He counselled his followers to remain faithful to the government, and to loyally and lawfully criticize it with a view to

*Lesson from Athens:
when you kill
informed dissent,
you kill democracy*

correcting its faults and errors. Concerned citizens of democracies have been doing just that ever since.

Socrates believed that the highest concern of any citizen should be the quest for knowledge. Only a knowledgeable person could tell when politicians were attempting to dupe the people or were pursuing harmful policies. The most useful citizen was one who brought a critical mind to public affairs and was constantly trying to find the real truth in political questions. The idea that citizens of a democracy have a positive duty to take a critical and well-informed approach to politics is a theme that has run through history from Socrates' time to ours.

You do not need to be a brilliant philosopher to know that, deep in their hearts, bad politicians fear and hate informed criticism. They will dodge, deflect, and attempt to suppress it whenever they can.

The final act in the killing of knowledgeable dissent is the killing of democracy. That is what happened in Athens when, under terrific internal and external stresses, its rowdy democratic government was replaced by an oligarchy known as the Twenty Tyrants.

The democratic system had lasted for less than a

century before it collapsed under the weight of the inborn tendency in human affairs to replace popular rule with authoritarianism. It is a tendency that has shown amazing strength over the ages. Scores of democratic regimes have been replaced by dictatorships in our own 20th century. The price of liberty is indeed eternal vigilance, and a refusal to believe that "it can't happen here."

Popular rule of some sort — it could hardly be called democracy — was practised on and off for some 400 years in the Roman Empire. Rome had its citizens, but many were of the second-class variety, equal before the law but denied any part in politics. The fortunate individual who enjoyed both civil and political rights was singled out as a "free man," a status we in the West now blithely take for granted. The Romans regarded their citizenship as well worth fighting for. The legendary hero Horatius was essentially defending citizens' rights when he made his celebrated stand against the Etruscans at the Sublician Bridge in the 6th century B.C.

The fall of the Roman Empire sent citizenship into eclipse in the so-called civilized world as one form of authoritarian government succeeded another. Under the feudal system that eventually became dominant in Europe, peasants and artisans did the bidding of their overlords — often to the death, in battle — out of simple fear of being abused.

The theory that kings drew their authority from God was especially effective in subjugating people in Europe in the latter Middle Ages. They were afraid to disobey their rulers because they believed this would amount to disobeying God, inviting eternal punishment.

As long as ordinary people remained under the heel of authoritarian rule, the only way to assert their demands for a voice in their own destinies was through armed rebellion. Rivers of blood were shed in attempts to gain some semblance of what we now call citizenship. Numerous peasant revolts were waged throughout Europe from the 12th to 16th centuries. They usually ended in the slaughter of the rebels and harsher rule than ever over the general populace.

The first successful mass revolt against authoritarianism in the western world did not occur until the late 18th century, when the Americans overthrew their British colonial masters. Citizens of the new United States of America won that enviable title at the price of much anguish in a bitter, hard-fought war. But U.S. citizenship was not, to say the least, for everyone. The American Constitution declared that all men were created equal, but said nothing about women. Nor did the definition of men include the multitude of black men being held in bondage in all of the

founding states.

The revolution that followed in France spread citizenship broadly throughout the population. The word "*citoyen*" became the touchstone of the movement; it replaced "madame" and "monsieur" as the standard form of address. But the revolution dealt a set-back to the march of citizenship when the lower classes took vicious revenge upon their upper-class compatriots. They went on to engage in a horrific internecine struggle which made a mockery of their slogan, "liberty, equality, and fraternity."

Across the English Channel in Great Britain, a civil war had been fought in the 1640s to assert the rights of Parliament vis-a-vis the monarch. But it was only the beginning of a protracted see-saw struggle over who would reign supreme. The right to vote and be elected to Parliament was strictly confined to affluent Anglicans; no Roman Catholics or non-Anglican Protestants could run for office. The great majority of residents of Britain were disenfranchised by property requirements. For them, citizenship in the modern sense of the word was a next-to-impossible dream.

The British people did not think of themselves as citizens, but as subjects of a monarch. In theory, a subject owes allegiance to a ruler, right or wrong. The allegiance of the British ruling class to the crown at the time of the French revolution was such that when the parliamentarian Charles James Fox proposed a toast to "our sovereign, the people," he suffered the disgrace of having his name stricken from the rolls of the Privy Council. His offence was to suggest that ultimate political authority could possibly reside in what the elite saw as an ignorant and volatile mob.

Ironically, much of the theory of modern participatory citizenship was developed by thinkers who would

The shocking notion of equality and majority rule

unhesitatingly have called themselves the British king's or queen's loyal subjects. First among them was the 17th century English philosopher John Locke, who held that all men were inherently free

and equal, a shockingly bold notion at the time. Locke argued that the power of the state should always rest with the people. The function of rulers should be restricted to carrying out the people's wishes, as expressed by their elected representatives.

Republican-style rule by citizens was anathema to many in King George III's North American colonies. Indeed, the founding fathers of the English-speaking parts of present-day eastern and central Canada were loyalists who had rejected American citizenship and moved north under conditions of severe hardship in

order to remain subjects of the British crown.

The constitutional history of French Canada began with a direct threat to the political rights of the majority. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, which laid down the ground rules for the governance of the present Quebec after the British conquest, called for an elected assembly. Since British law at the time still stipulated that Roman Catholics could not hold elected office, the creation of an assembly would have meant that a few hundred newly arrived British settlers would control the affairs of some 65,000 French-speaking Catholics.

The British governor, James Murray, refused to hold elections for the assembly on the grounds that it would alienate the French-speaking population. Finally, after considerable coming and going, the British Parliament in 1791 passed the Constitutional Act, which established an elected assembly open to all. A majority of French-speaking Roman Catholic members were duly elected some 50 years before their co-religionists in Great Britain were permitted to sit in Parliament.

Paying the price of citizens' rights in blood and imprisonment

The electoral franchise was much more widely and evenly spread throughout society in British North America than in Britain. This was because there were proportionately many more land-owners entitled to vote here than in the "old country." There was also more of an inclination to exercise the political power of the majority.

Much as they might abhor the excesses of popular rule in their former homeland, the loyalists had brought quasi-democratic ideas over the border with them. They successfully agitated for greater representation and a stronger voice in running local affairs. Still, the early assemblies had a consultative role only. The British governors of the colonies could overrule any law they passed.

The rebellions in 1837-38 in Lower and Upper Canada were basically aimed at overthrowing the authoritarian ruling cliques that had clustered around the governors. Though militarily unsuccessful, the revolts opened the door to the recognition that the governor must accede to the wishes of the voters' representatives. Thus, in Canada as elsewhere, the price of the rule of the citizenry was paid in the blood and imprisonment of an idealistic and intrepid few.

More Canadian blood and tears would be shed before the achievement of the distinctive citizenship which we now know in this country. In World War I, though still officially British subjects by virtue of their colo-



nial past, Canadians fought together as a unified national force. The shared experiences of that ghastly war gave Canadians a sense of identity, and won for Canada a permanent place in the community of nations. Never again would Canadians think of themselves as colonials. Their major role in the great struggle in Europe had given them a quiet but sure-minded national pride.

World War I indirectly extended the reach of civil rights in Canada. Partly in recognition of their war-time contribution, women were accorded the right to vote in 1919. Yet Canada was anything but a paragon of equality. At a time when racial discrimination was a way of life, people of Asian origin were systematically denied British subject status, which had come to amount to a fairly comprehensive package of civil rights.

It took another excruciating war to finally put the stamp of distinctiveness on Canadians' civil status. In

*The sight of
Canadian soldiers'
graves inspired
the Citizenship Act*

World War II, they fought on land, in the air and at sea under their own national symbols and command. Despite its small population, Canada was a leading contributor to the allied victory. The vast

achievements of the Canadian war effort brought another upsurge in national pride.

The irony was that, while they were fighting to restore the rights of national citizenship to Europeans whose lands had been occupied by brutally repressive forces, Canadians themselves did not have a national citizenship. Canada had been running its own affairs for many years, but Canadians officially remained British subjects. The arrangement was not without its benefits; for instance, Canadian-born British subjects abroad were able to call on the assistance of Britain's worldwide network of diplomatic missions. But by the end of World War II, the day of clinging to the mother country's apron strings had clearly passed.

In the aftermath of victory, a Canadian cabinet minister, Paul Martin (Senior), visited the graves of soldiers who had fallen at Dieppe in a tragic military misadventure. Touched by the sight of the remains of fighting men from every part of the country lying together, Martin decided there and then that Canadians fully deserved their own unique citizenship.

He became the political father of the Canadian Citizenship Act, which came into effect half a century ago

in January, 1947. The act contained at least one feature that set Canadian citizenship ahead of that of other countries in terms of rights and equality. It provided that married women would not lose their citizenship if their husbands became citizens of another country. The lumping-in of a woman's citizenship with that of her husband was then common practice in most of the world.

The Citizenship Act was thoroughly revised in 1977 to keep pace with trends in society. The 1977 Act confirmed Canada's commitment to complete equality for all of its citizens. It acknowledged Canada's character as a multicultural nation by reducing the waiting period for naturalization from five to three years. This was done at a time when other countries were busily making their citizenship laws more restrictive. The Act was a reflection of the sense of fairness and tolerance for which Canadians are renowned.

Today, a Canadian citizenship certificate is a sought-after prize among people born in countries where civil rights are limited or non-existent. It formally guarantees freedom of religion, expression, and lawful assembly, and freedom from discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnic origin or disability. People born in this country do not give much thought to the preciousness of their birthright in a world in which discrimination and injustice remain rampant. Nor do they stop to think about the selfless sacrifices that have been made throughout the ages to arrive at the liberty and equality they are privileged to possess today.

Twenty-five hundred years after citizenship first emerged in the ancient world, nothing has changed in the basic concept formulated by the Athenian philosophers. An unspoken pact still exists between the citizen and the state. For their part, citizens are still expected to do their best to support and promote the welfare of the state, to obey its laws, to take a knowledgeable and rigorous view of public affairs, and to get out and vote as an implicit matter of duty. Socrates' exhortation to do all in one's power to improve the state extends into what we now call "being a good citizen" by taking an active part in local community affairs.

Being especially blessed in the benefits of their citizenship, Canadians should be especially bound by the voluntary obligations it carries. Only by consciously and diligently fulfilling those obligations can they ensure that the phrase "a citizen of Canada" will continue to excite admiration and envy around the world.

