



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

Vol. 40, No. 8

HEAD OFFICE, MONTREAL, OCTOBER 1959

## *Building a Better Community*

**C**OMMUNITY, in the sense of "a better community" does not mean a municipality, a trading area, or a district. There is a richness in the word "community" that goes far beyond all these and has something to do with the flowering of human lives.

People in good communities are neighbours in the democratic process. They co-operate and collaborate to solve problems and make improvements. They are comprehended in St. Augustine's definition of human society: a group, large or small, of people united by agreement as to the things they love.

The dynamic quality that makes a community good does not reside in the official structure, but in the interests, desires and purposes of the people in it. If a community wishes to improve itself in Canada it has freedom to try, without coercion or external control. Citizen knowledge, interest and action are the life-blood of our democratic society.

A collection of houses, shops and factories may be as small as a hamlet or as big as a metropolis. It may not be the most beautiful in Canada, or the most efficient, or the most dignified by public buildings and statues, but it can aspire to be a lovable community. Its men and women can make it so.

Plato was strongly impressed with the social nature of man, and with the need to think about society in its relation to man's life. In his study of ethics, instead of enquiring into the characteristics of a virtuous life in an individual, Plato endeavoured first to determine the characteristics of a good State. Having found what these are, he believed that it would be perfectly easy to infer what are the characteristics of a good man.

It seemed to Plato that there were four virtues required for the existence of an ideal State: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. These are qualities which will serve as a standard of judgment and behaviour in building a better community.

To have a community, men must work together; to have a better community they must have common

principles. Their individual purposes need not be all the same, but the basic things in which they believe must be identical. They must live by the same rules.

The intimacy and stability of the small town or neighbourhood have been severely shaken by technology and mobility. We find it difficult to contrive new gadgets and yet hold fast to old institutions and forms of behaviour. But we can be comforted by the thought that if community life is somewhat imperfect the fault can be corrected by more earnest planning and doing.

### *Sense of community*

What is the core of community building? It is not a master plan or a detailed blue-print, or the acquirement of park space, or the flotation of loans. It is the spirit of the people.

When neighbours start asking questions about the future they are developing a community feeling. When they ask: "Where are we heading; what can we do to make and keep our neighbourhood a good place to live?" then they will find the resources to face the future with confidence and anticipation.

Most of us would admit that we are not satisfied with what is mediocre. We have higher values. But to gain what is excellent it is not enough that we wish for it. We need to exert ourselves to get it, being dissatisfied to settle for anything less than the best.

People cannot live in isolation, so they need to plan for getting along together. Machines, possessions and utilities are useful only to the extent that they add to the comfort of living. They do not substitute for the feeling of friendship and communion.

One of the exciting things about any neighbourhood is that it consists of people who differ in background, in their recognition of civic problems, and in their acceptance of proposed solutions.

We have a larger number of cultures represented in Canada than in most countries of the world, and this merging of cultures contributes to the richness and

diversity of life. The varied folkways, languages, customs, craft skills and ideals can be shared, so that the community becomes the handiwork of all.

Where there are different folkways, there is need of tolerance. The good community is not built by people who think that their preferred way of living is the only right way. We need skill in the process of working together. We need to take our places as members of groups. Our education system, recreation programmes and progressive health plans can be deprived of their goodness if we allow our community to become poisoned by bigotry or snobbery.

### *Getting started*

What are the causes of civic apathy? They include a feeling of defeatism and discouragement; failure of the authorities to bring civic matters within the field of interest and concern of every representative segment of the people; failure to communicate, to explain, to consult; scepticism about the good that can be contributed by individual effort.

Another difficulty in some municipalities is the jangle of competition among elected representatives, social and civic agencies, and voluntary associations. Their competition for the attention, the energy and the support of the people results in confusion out of which arises a feeling of "what's the use?"

A democratic society needs an orderly process for considering its problems. All the elected and voluntary groups having to do with education, health, town planning, recreation, social service and general well-being need to develop consultative machinery. Co-ordination will eliminate duplication and frustration, and focus the interest and energy of all the people on the most important things to be tackled and completed.

Any municipality is capable of providing what its people want if the people reach agreement about their desires and pursue their ideals with planned energy. The question challenging everybody is: Are you sincerely interested in working to make your neighbourhood the best place on earth in which to live and bring up your children? If the answer is "yes", then your ideal personality will find itself, and work out its hopes, in joint action with other like-minded persons.

The respected citizen in every city or town does more than merely live there. He achieves dignity through his contribution to the community of which he is a part. Alfred Adler put it this way: "People always make mistakes if they do not see that their whole significance must consist in their contribution to the lives of others."

To participate does not call for an heroic grappling with uninteresting situations. Everyone should concern himself with finding a phase of activity which commands

his honest interest. Everyone has some quality of mind or hand to make his contribution significant.

### *Business and the community*

This principle applies with full force to business companies. Business executives may deplore the conflict of pressure groups and the chaotic official structure in the municipality in comparison with the well-organized efficiency of their own offices and factories, but they cannot ignore community affairs. A good business is a good citizen, with citizenship privileges and responsibilities.

Looking at this relationship in another way, we realize that firms operating industries want their people to be happy, and therefore look upon a good community as part of their assets. Among the qualities studied before establishing a factory or branch are these: the extent of cultural activity, the adequacy of the school system and the extent and type of community facilities. One firm selected its new branch site more than a thousand miles from other sites under consideration because of a favourable community situation.

The good community offers opportunities to men and women to demonstrate social qualities which are also good business qualities. Young people who have shown leadership talent in the affairs of their municipalities are preferred choices for advancement in the managerial staffs of their companies.

Big industries are properly reluctant to assume a parent role in community development. They encourage their workers to participate in making the municipality into a good community. The result may not be perfect, but it is more lovable than the spotless efficiency of the benevolent father.

The welfare municipality may be noble in motive, but it provides more and more things for men which once they provided for themselves. This involves making decisions for men which once they made for themselves, and undertaking responsibilities which once were theirs, and thus diminishing the special qualities that distinguish man from animals and vegetables, the special qualities that make him man.

As was said at the Duke of Edinburgh's Study Conference by a speaker from Africa's Gold Coast: "People are happier and become better citizens if they are encouraged to think and to put effort into doing things for themselves, for their families and for their community group." There are all sorts of things which it is better for a community to do for itself, even if these things could be done more efficiently by outsiders.

### *Asking questions*

A transition implies not merely a goal but a starting point. If we are to move the community, as Archimedes

threatened to move the world with his lever, we need some ground to stand on.

There are certain key words to guide the person seeking a way to improve his community: *find out* the necessary facts; *survey* the areas where improvement is needed; *make an inventory* of the resources in people and materials; *explore* means of rousing interest; *inform* the public of every step; *provide opportunities* for everyone to share in the planning and work.

After making a survey of the municipality, be sure to validate your findings: is this proposed change really significant to an appreciable number of citizens? It is easy to become caught up in momentary enthusiasm for something trifling. The man who finds his car caught in a bottleneck wants the cork drawn, but does the end justify a community effort?

It is necessary in any society to learn not merely the facts of life but how those facts are viewed by other people. One should relate what is strategically desirable to what is technically possible with the facilities at one's disposal and the support one will be given.

Instead of floundering around in the underbrush, speculating as to where the path is, let us climb a tree and see the whole landscape. Instead of a mere track there may be a broad highway within sight. The search for utopias and the fountain of eternal youth have been fruitless, but it has been a boon to mankind that there have been people eager to climb the heights looking for them.

If someone were to ask the question: "What sort of community are you seeking to build?" the answer might be something like this: the people in our ideal community are alert to community interests and are ready to seize opportunities for civic betterment; groups and workers communicate readily, so that people are not working at cross purposes; everyone takes pride in co-operative achievement and joyfully accepts civic responsibility; the organizations have aims that are clearly stated, ardently pursued, and efficiently carried out.

Municipalities become good communities more by the positive actions of good men and women than by the repression or extermination of evil. Negative aims are not enough. We need the invigorating stimulus of supporting some cause dynamically or pursuing some purpose fervently.

### *Constant adjustment*

Making the community a wholesome place to live in implies more than occasional outbursts of energy.

All our institutions are undergoing change, rendered necessary by the progressive civilization of mankind. Fixations in social patterns have to be replaced by willingness to explore.

Adaptation is a continuous process in nature, of which we are a part. We seek to hold fast to that which is good, while adding innovating practices of promise. It is important to see that the changes are not made with a view to merely temporary advantages.

The good community cannot be created by a junto of busybodies, but it does need the services of a lot of busy people. There is no galaxy of experts competent to build a good community. It is necessary to make proper use of expert knowledge while preserving control by the people.

One function of the voluntary body is to ascertain and make known the needs of the community and the desires of the people. The municipal government will have statistics of population, houses, miles of streets, acres of parks, and so forth, but it cannot read from its files the human experiences and aspirations on which planning a better community should be based.

People like to participate in community life. The need for a swimming pool and the need of a man for participation in community life are separate and distinct needs: they come together when the process for acquiring a swimming pool permits the citizen to take part in planning it. They do not blend when people are forced to accept a solution worked out for them under the sort of government called "consent-democracy" wherein they are limited to saying "yes" or "no" to a prepared plan.

There are many needs in a democratic society which cannot be met by statutory authority. It was said in the Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (the Massey Commission): "The importance of voluntary societies in a democracy needs little emphasis in this generation which knows that their suppression is the first move of a dictatorship; but it is perhaps not fully realized to what extent democracy depends upon their activities".

A progressive civic council will recognize citizen participation as a high priority need. It will pool the experience and thinking of those citizens and groups of citizens most competent to consider various problems that crop up, and then incorporate that thinking in its deliberation.

The best planning will flower when the diverse parts of the community — council, school board, welfare agencies, labour and business leaders, religious leaders, service clubs and all other groups — discuss the needs of the municipality with one another, establish priorities, and combine their resources to do the work.

Social life revolves around these organizations and groups, and all of them are community forces waiting

to be channelled into a tremendous force for community betterment. The small streams will join together at the touch of a master force to form a river of considerable size and power.

This good result of group participation and the union of groups is not produced by establishing a hierarchy of leaders or cliques but by a fusion of thought among people of earnest goodwill. A writer about democracy said it this way: If I give you a dollar and you give me a dollar, we shall each have one dollar; but if I give you an idea and you give me an idea, we shall each have two ideas.

Perhaps it will be necessary, in order to get things started, to bring the groups together under a moderator who is not a member of any of the groups. The individuality of groups must be respected, while striving for effective co-operative action.

A round-table conference will bring to light many ideas for the good of the community. Any neighbourhood in Canada can muster an enormous amount of brains in such a gathering.

When the ideas have been tabled, there are three things remaining to do. The needs should be grouped by kinds or areas so that the problems can be defined and discussed in an orderly way. When the problems have been specified and understood, the next step is to examine various plans for dealing with them. The third step is to assign groups or persons to take action.

Round-table discussion is significant only when it deepens thought, broadens horizons and opens up vistas of vital service. It is insignificant when it is used by individuals for personal satisfaction, to press some private indulgence, or to prop up a pet project with a cobweb of words.

The appearance of being a pressure group should be avoided. Volunteers should work constructively with the authorities as far as possible. We should not confuse the sort of co-operative group we have been discussing with so-called leagues which mushroom around election time as fronts for special issues.

### *On being realistic*

Many of us are inclined, when we take part in community work, to lay aside the material measuring rod, which seems vulgar in so exalted activity, but we must be realistic in our aims and demands. We should not be like the philosophers castigated by Francis Bacon in his book *Advancement of Learning*. They make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths, and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light because they are so high.

Some people with good intentions fail to get desirable things done because they think and talk in terms of vague generalizations; they don't come to grips with

real situations. Others hunt far and wide for novel or subtle ways of doing things, instead of facing the needs of the situation in a straightforward way. Still others fail to keep their eye on the ball. They have a programme on child welfare one month, on education the next, on the menace of the atom bomb the third month. Much is said, and probably there is a lot of good in it, but the effect is superficial and smattering, with little happening of a constructive nature.

### *Inform the people*

Vital to the success of any movement for improving the community is that the people be kept informed fully and intelligibly. Community effort will prosper more by attraction than by promotion, but in order to attract you must inform.

Here is a great and constructive work for the neighbourhood newspaper. Every issue should display reports of things planned and things done toward building a good community. Every editorial page should propose new ideas, comment on progress and heap coals upon the fires of enthusiasm.

The newspaper can be, in words engraved upon the building of the *Detroit News*: "Reflector of every human interest . . . friend of every righteous cause . . . encourager of every generous act . . . mirror of the public mind . . . troubler of the public conscience . . . interpreter of the public intent . . . nourisher of the community spirit."

### *To sum up*

It is better to participate in the creation of good things than to boast of their possession.

Since the beginning, men and women who grouped themselves together in communities have been faced with many problems. In seeking solutions, they have been handicapped by ignorance, prejudice, and mental inertia. Despite all this, man has, over a few thousand years, succeeded in improving his environment and has had an enjoyable time doing it.

It is, indeed, a poor rejoinder to say about a suggestion for community betterment "our fathers got along all right without all this fuss". Because of the planning and work that they did we are given today's opportunities. But we cannot be merely onlookers at the pageant of life.

New conditions have brought new needs, and only the community whose people are guided by intelligent awareness of its needs and a determination to meet them can preserve the goodness it has.

This is a job for people with faith that even the most threatening situation can be handled successfully by co-ordinated effort; that even the best they can imagine for their community can be achieved.