

# RBC Letter

## A Citizen of Today's Canada

*"A Citizen of Today's Canada" is based upon a RBC Letter published in 1966 called "A Citizen of Canada." With the passage of 38 years, we felt it was time to update the original content to reflect the realities of what it means to be a citizen of Canada in the 21st century. The broader issue of citizenship was also addressed in a Letter published in 1948 called "The Meaning of citizenship" and more recently in a Letter published in 1997 called "The Prize of Citizenship."*

Canadian citizens have cause for pride and reason to view the future with hope. We can be proud of building a single, prosperous nation in the face of vast distances and an unrelenting climate. We should be even prouder of our unbroken tradition of constitutional government and the rule of law. It is a long tradition. We think of Canada as a young country, but at 137 years our federation is older than all but a handful of the world's regimes. And we can be proud, too, that Canadians have fought and died to preserve our freedoms and those of the world.

Thus to be a Canadian is to be a citizen of no mean country. In the historian Frank Underhill's words, we are a nation because we have done great things together in the past – and also because we hope to do great things together in the future. If we can look forward with hope, it is because Canada's democracy has flourished by constantly renewing itself, becoming steadily more inclusive as we have evolved from a collection of colonies to a country whose mix of cultures and range of political traditions makes us distinctive, perhaps unique.

"Renewing" is the key word here, because while the Canadian polity in 2004 has a long tradition, it is also very much a work in progress, a country in the grip of sweeping social change. Since this Royal Bank letter was last issued in 1967, Canadian public life has been transformed by two trends, sometimes contradictory and sometimes mutually reinforcing: the growth of human rights and the quest for group recognition and identity.



That all human beings have inalienable rights simply by the fact of being human is not a new idea, but in the last half of the twentieth century it was emphatically an idea whose time had come. National governments have more and more been judged by their respect for these rights or lack of it. Canadians had traditionally conceived of their rights as constitutional, rather than inherent. Parliament and the courts were seen as their safeguards, but since the rights themselves were ill-defined neither was particularly satisfactory. The adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 revolutionized this situation and has

done as much as any single force to change Canadian society since. Responsibility for enforcing the Charter rests with the courts, and they have fairly consistently given judgments extending the scope of rights to new groups and situations. In the process they have greatly helped groups who had been pushed to the margins in our first century of national life to claim

a place in the Canadian sun. Women and Canada's Aboriginal peoples have placed their issues firmly on the national agenda. Encouraged by their success many other groups have become publicly visible and vocal. Most of them have made substantial gains in terms of recognition, respect, legal protection, restitution or apology, according to their different goals.

In many respects their success is a Canadian version of another world-wide trend. This is the need humans today feel to define and defend their group identity in an increasingly homogenous world. It was once thought that spreading prosperity and increasing trade, tourism and cultural exchange would erode the differences between human communities, however

defined – national, ethnic or religious – and thereby bring the dream of a tolerant and humane world closer. Evidence tends to show, however, that while measurable differences may have indeed been lessened, this has in no way diminished the compelling human need for a sense of identity. In many instances it may have increased it. Here Canada has a striking example. The measurable differences between the French- and English-speaking populations have never been less than they are in 2004, yet the Québécois sense of identity is as strong as ever. In a country as diverse as Canada, this quest for identity – and for public recognition of that identity – has profound implications for the meaning of our citizenship. Striking an equitable balance between group rights and individual rights will keep courts and legislatures occupied for decades to come.



Canadians in 1967 thought of themselves as a diverse society, and by most standards they were; but they still tended to see Canada in terms of the long-established division between French and English. Today that mental framework is not obsolete, but it is almost laughably inadequate to describe the Canada of 2004. Decades of immigration from every corner of the globe have made Canada, and especially our three great cities, one of the most diverse societies that has ever existed. The extent of the change is astonishing to anyone who remembers the Canada of Mackenzie King. Toronto, once famed as a stronghold of all things Anglo-Saxon, now has just as many non-whites.

Perhaps even more remarkable has been the calm, or even enthusiasm, with which this change has been accepted by Canadians. Racial incidents continue to occur, and should emphatically not be ignored, but this is a field where it is especially important not to allow headlines to obscure the true picture. Canadians have understood that out of manifold talents and different ways of looking at things come originality, strength, and a forward-moving spirit. Out of our multiple heritages have come our basic freedoms, our democratic way of life, our art, literature and music. Most important, we have inherited the spirit of challenge, of exploring and pioneering. We have assembled in Canada adventurous and creative spirits from many peoples, and with them are pushing forward on many frontiers, scientific, cultural and spiritual.

The challenge before Canadians is another version of the tension between individual and group rights. We have to identify the true meaning of citizenship in a nation where so many different cultures and identities find a home. Unless the citizenship of a nation embodies values and beliefs that its citizens share, it is form without content, a bundle of legal rights and nothing more. Today, perhaps two values can be seen as fundamental to the overarching Canadian identity. The first is democracy in the broadest sense. The second is the acceptance of responsibility for our common future.

Few words carry more baggage than “democracy.” It meant one thing to the Athenians who invented the word and something else again to the drafters of the American Constitution. It has been invoked in modern times to justify every imaginable policy. No one is against it. Even the most despotic regimes usually describe themselves as the Democratic Republic of X. Anyone setting out to describe it is in the position of the blind men identifying the elephant – but the attempt must be made all the same.

An ideal democracy is a world where every man and every woman can find a place in society suited to his or her inclinations and capabilities. It is a country where the ordinary citizen, no matter how humble, has a chance to better his life. It provides the environment to bring out extraordinary abilities in ordinary people – and allows extraordinary people to reach for the stars. Perhaps because of the sheer size of our country, Canadian democracy in particular offers a certain roominess of life. This is a land where every man and every woman can find a place in society suited to his or her inclinations and capabilities.

If this is the goal, it is not reached simply by passing laws. Democracy is essentially a state of mind. It is learned behaviour, just as much as table manners or ballet dancing. We learn about it by studying or working alongside people who do or say things new to us, and by listening sympathetically to people who question some of our assumptions. A fully functioning democracy does indeed provide certain clearly defined freedoms: of speech, of discussion, of assembly, of the press, of vocation, of ownership, of residence, of movement, of worship, of political belief, of association, and freedom from unjust arrest. All are important, but all of them are likely to prove hollow unless the citizens who enjoy them are prepared to show the initiative, the restraint and the responsibility to make them work.

Citizens of a democracy must be prepared to restrain their actions if they do not want the state to do it for them. Democracy is a way of living in which the people rule by discussion and compromise.

Everyone going somewhere through a crowd must step aside, keep his elbows in, back up or advance, according to conditions. Equally you do not need to have the same religion or colour as the woman next door, but she and you need to have the same ideas about citizenship. The citizens must accept the spirit of a democracy's institutions, even while questioning the letter of its laws or rejecting their application.

The ultimate test of our commitment to democracy is the fundamental goal of human freedom, for ourselves and for others. Freedom itself is constantly being redefined, as people become aware of the fetters that can spring from law, custom, background, poverty, disability and ill-health. That is one reason why Canadian democracy is not a static condition but a journey. In practice this means doing two things: being open to new ideas, while retaining all that is best in our political tradition.

People who go through life with granite-like convictions on every subject under the sun lead a cheerless existence. They miss all the fun of exploring, all the challenge of debating, and all the thrill of finding something new. Of course these are never painless experiences. We are indulging in juvenile thinking if we expect life to be always smooth, fragrant and responsive to our wishes. Medical men must examine disease if they are to promote health; music, to create harmony, must investigate discord; the citizen has to learn what is ailing in society to produce a healthy nation. It is natural that people should disagree; indeed, there would be little point to democracy unless people disagreed. But to disagree because of ignorance is deplorable, and to disagree because of disinterest is not civil. Building a common Canadian future brings together people of strongly differing views. Each must be given an open-minded hearing. Canadians in fact must be prepared to go beyond tolerance to an active determination to recognize and use the best, whatever its origins. To build a Canada with room for all we will have to use stone from many quarries.

At the same time we must never forget that we did not create our democracy out of nothing. It exists only as the result of centuries of constitutional government in the whole western world. We are the beneficiaries of much priceless experience in shaping free societies. We are the debtors of many, many people who risked

their lives and property to defend and extend the rule of law. We are, in short, free because we stand on the shoulders of the free people who went before us. Nothing can ever replace this heritage. It would be a tragedy if well-intentioned Canadians, perhaps striving too hard to be inclusive, consented to its dilution or abandonment.



Historically citizenship has been a privileged status. "I am a Roman citizen" was a claim to well-defined legal rights. It has never altogether lost this character. Canadian citizenship brings the right to vote for the higher levels of government and thereby to shape the country's future. It brings the right to a passport, with freedom to travel and the protection of the Canadian state. And – a point often undervalued -- it is hereditary, the only status (outside the Aboriginal peoples) to be so in our society. A new citizen gains his privileges for his children as well as for himself. Perhaps most important, citizenship helps the new citizen to define him or herself. Citizenship and only citizenship brings full membership of Canadian society, and is a long step toward creating a sense of Canadian identity.

It is a cliché, but it is also profoundly true that all privilege entails responsibility if it is to perform a useful social role. Democracy is a responsibility as well as an opportunity. Personal effort is of the greatest significance in keeping democracy on the rails and progressing. You cannot vote democracy and then go home and forget it. Democracy needs to be lived by every citizen so as to create the moral and spiritual atmosphere in which the government must operate. The elected representatives have to be assisted, inspired, and sometimes prodded, by public opinion if they are to provide the conditions in which men and women may set about making themselves happy. Democracy is not threatened by the corruption of officials, but by the cynical acceptance of corruption by the electorate. The only true protection of human rights is not the Charter or any other document, but the understanding of their rights by the people and their determination to preserve them, along with their understanding that injustice to one is injustice to all.

Defining the responsibility of a Canadian citizen can take many forms, as is natural in a highly pluralistic society, but a group of widely shared traits can be identified. When we say that someone is a "good citizen," we do not usually mean that he or she always votes or has memorized the Charter of Rights. We mean someone who is an active member of civil

society as well as of the formal institutions of government. Good citizens are good neighbours. As members of the community they will have real consideration for the feelings and needs of other people. They will support their institutions, and will give people of another religion or race the same consideration as he expects. They will set apart time and put forth some effort to help their neighbours to make the community a better place to live in. They will take an active part in helping their neighbours make the government of the community work better.

Good citizens as parents will teach their children to get along well with other people, encourage them to get a suitable education, and teach them to accept more and more responsibility for their actions as they grow toward maturity. They guide and direct, participate sympathetically in the ups and downs of adolescent life, and provide fruitful soil in which young people develop settled roots. Their children, governed by principles, will be open to new ideas without being led astray by every wind of doctrine they encounter.

Finally, good citizens know the important problems that face their representatives in municipal, provincial and federal government. They study and discuss these problems so as to make use of the knowledge when they go to vote. This is an inescapable duty, because the strength of a democracy depends upon its electorate being well-informed.

It is evident, then, that much more than legalities are meant by becoming a citizen of Canada. The essence of good citizenship is the acceptance of responsibility. Every citizen is under bond to do his best in caring not only for himself and his family but also for society. Citizenship is thus not something for passive minds. The lonely person who stands on the side-lines watching the parade, speculating and conjecturing and criticizing, and thinking how much better the show might be, is not a citizen, for citizenship demands participation, involvement, and contribution. No man gains a feeling of significance in life if he lives in isolation. The Greek word "idiot" originally meant, not someone mentally challenged but a citizen who refuses to take part in the public life of the city. Pericles, Athenian statesman of the fifth century B.C. said: "We do not allow absorption in our own affairs to interfere with participation in the city's."



It is sometimes suggested – most recently by Prof. Jennifer Welsh in the 2004 Hart House Lecture – that Canada's democratic and pluralistic society can be a model for an increasingly globalized world, where more than 3,000 ethnic groups have to find room in 190 countries. This is an idea many Canadians find deeply attractive, but it is not without its pitfalls. Being a successful model will require tact, emotional intelligence, a willingness to listen and a commitment to the long haul. We should not expect to be welcomed with open arms, nor that the excellence of our intentions will be obvious to all. Nor should we think of the exercise as cost-free. If we are to offer more than good advice – something the world never lacks – we must be prepared to commit people as advisers, elections observers, peacekeepers and mediators. There will be dangers and there will be financial costs. Paradoxically, we will probably be most successful as a model for others if we do not make this our primary goal. Let us do what we have to do and do it supremely well, and let the world draw its own conclusions.

This is a time to read the record of Canada's past, and find our citizenship ten times more meaningful than it has ever seemed before. The recent awakening of interest in Canada's history is an immensely encouraging sign for the future, for if we do not know our own history we cannot know who we are. Nations have been defined as "imagined communities," existing in the minds of their people. Canada is thus at once what each separate citizen of Canada believes it to be, and the sum of their collective beliefs. Equally, its future will depend on the contribution of every citizen individually as well as the sum of their efforts. Citizenship, to repeat, above all means responsibility.

At its best, citizenship gives orientation to life. Our citizenship stirs us to enjoy and contribute to a society where people advance together in search of the good life. Of course, some will say: "all this is counsel of perfection: things are not so simple." The details of nation-building will certainly not be simple. Canada is not a simple place. Yet a democratic society contains infinite possibilities of hope and renewal. Canada will be as democratic as its citizens make it – and good citizenship can be simple, if Canadians will think of it not as something merely legal or intellectual, but as something transcending law and reason, something so deeply felt and deeply believed that it runs through everything we do.

