

VERNMENT



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THE IDEA OF CITIZENSHIP

An address by Mr. L.B. Pearson, Secretary of State for External Affairs, before the Rotary Club, Ottawa, May 21, 1951, on the occasion of a visit to Ottawa of 132 High School Students from across Canada.

... It is interesting to recall the development of the idea of citizenship from its original concept, a Greek one, of loyalty to one's city. That loyalty was not difficult, because the things nearest and dearest and most appealing to us, such as our family and our civic pride and interest always have a special place in our sentiment.

Then from the Greek concept there developed the idea of "Civis Romanus Sum", to include any person owing allegiance to Rome. From this grew the imperial concept of a citizenship, which brought order, if not freedom, to such a great part of the world at that time. The break-up of the Roman Empire, with its emphasis on order and civic virtue, was followed first by the Dark Ages and then by feudalism, where the emphasis was on status rather than citizenship, and where society was based on a hierarchy of loyalties and fealties. Out of the feudalism grew the modern state, with its stressing of nationality, the equality of citizens before the law, of pride in citizenship and the right of every citizen to the protection of his nation state. The pinnacle of this idea was reached, probably, in the middle of the 19th Century in Great Britain, when a Foreign Minister, Lord Palmerston, could say: "Just as the Roman of old could feel secure when he could say, "Civis Romanus Sum", so, today, the British Subject, in whatever clime he may be, can feel that the strong arm and the watchful eye of Britain will protect him from all wrong."

At times, this imperial concept of citizenship tended to become bombastic and exclusive, and to rouse the resentment of "lesser breeds beyond the law". In one sense, in recent years, we have abandoned it for something more national and less imperial. In another sense, however, we are widening it toward a citizenship which would cover all free peoples, with its emphasis on internationalism rather than nationalism.

This idea was put whimsically and impressively by an editor of the NEW YORKER some years ago, when he wrote:

"After the third war was over (this was our curious dream), there was no more than a handful of people left alive, and the earth was in ruins and the ruins were horrible to behold. The people, the survivors, decided to meet to talk over their problem and to make a lasting peace, which is the customary thing to make after a long, exhausting war. There were eighty-three countries, and each country sent a delegate to the convention....Each

delegate brought the flag of his homeland with him - each, that is, except the delegate from China. When the others asked him why he had failed to bring a flag, he said that he had discussed the matter with another Chinese survivor, an ancient and very wise man, and that between them they had concluded that they would not have any cloth flag for China any more.

"What kind of flag do you intend to have?" asked the delegate from Luxembourg.

"The Chinese delegate blinked his eyes and produced a shoe-box, from which he drew a living flower which looked very like an iris.

"What is that?" they all inquired, pleased with the sight of so delicate a symbol.

"That", said the Chinese, 'is a wild flag, Iris Tectorum. In China we have decided to adopt this flag, since it is a convenient and universal device and very beautiful and grows everywhere in the moist places of the earth for all to observe and wonder at. I propose all countries adopt it, so that it will be impossible for us to insult each other's flag.'

"Can it be waved?" asked the American delegate, who wore a troubled expression and a Party button.

"The Chinese gentleman moved the flag gently to and fro. 'It can be waved, yes,' he answered. 'But, it is more interesting in repose or as the breeze stirs it.'

"I see it is monocotyledonous," said the Dutch delegate, who was an amiable man.

"I don't see how a strong foreign policy can be built around a wild flag which is the same for everybody," complained the Latvian.

"It can't be," said the Chinese. 'That is one of the virtues of my little flag. I should remind you that the flag was once yours, too. It is the oldest flag in the world, the original one, you might say. We are now, gentlemen, in an original condition again. There are very few of us.'

"The German delegate arose stiffly. 'I would be a poor man indeed,' he said, 'did I not feel that I belonged to the master race. And for that I need a special flag, natürlich.'

"At the moment," replied the Chinese, 'the master race, like so many other races, is suffering from the handicap of being virtually extinct. There are fewer than two hundred people left in the entire world, and we suffer from a multiplicity of banners.'

"The delegate from Patagonia spoke up. 'I fear that the wild flag, one for all, will prove an unpopular idea.'

"It will, undoubtedly," sighed the Chinese delegate. 'But now that there are only a couple of hundred people on earth, even the word 'unpopular' loses most of its meaning.'

At this juncture we might conceivably act in a sensible, rather than a popular, manner.' And he produced eighty-two more shoeboxes, and handed a wild flag to each delegate, bowing ceremoniously.

"Next day the convention broke up and the delegates returned to their homes, marveling at what they had accomplished in so short a time. And that is the end of our dream."

We have not, of course, reached the ideal embodied in this story, but I think, in spite of discouragements, we are making some progress toward it, at least in the free world. Certainly, the contrast between alien and citizen is weakening. For this we must thank, I think, the experience and the evolution of our Commonwealth of Nations with its emphasis on association, as well as independence. We can also point to the intimacy of the relationship between Canadians and Americans. They are technically aliens to each other, but certainly no Canadian ever feels an alien when sitting, say, in the bleachers of the Yankee Stadium in New York. Significant also is the development of a North Atlantic association, a community of peoples with special relationships under the North Atlantic Pact. All this is, I think, to the good, because the advance of science has made a mock of national boundaries; or, indeed, even parallels of latitude! The world is too small for competing, jealous, rival states.

In all this, there should be no contradiction between loyalty to our own country and loyalty to humanity, just as today there is no contradiction between loyalty to our city, and loyalty to our province, or to our country. As we move toward these larger horizons, there need be no weakening of our devotion to our own country. Certainly we can be proud of that country. It has gained a proud place in the councils of the world. This, however, should be no cause for boastful pride or smug satisfaction, but for sober consideration of the responsibilities that this position place on the shoulders of our 14 million people.

With these responsibilities there go new duties, new problems, as well as new opportunities. We cannot any longer sit back and say, let John Bull or Uncle Sam do the job; remain negative and passive in a swiftly moving world. Nor should we, on the other hand, be too assertive or too smug. We do not need to assume that we are doing everything we should do or could do to secure our citizenship at home, and defend it abroad by assisting our friends in preventing a communist aggression, which would replace it by a ruthless dictatorship in which the citizens would be supine and obedient tools.

We can take pride in Canada that we are citizens of a free democracy, a social and economic democracy, as well as a political one. We should never be on the defensive in discussing it. More important, we should never take it for granted. If we do, we may lose our freedom and only then awaken to what it really means. I have seen this happen in countries behind the Iron Curtain where people realized too late what their citizenship meant. I have heard the lament of the lost when it was too late to do anything about it. Indeed, it may well be that the greatest danger to our free citizenship may not come from outside, but from within, in our indifference and our carelessness, in our selfish feeling that the other fellow can work at being a good citizen, while we go after the profits and the pleasures. We hear a good deal these days of the Fifth Column of those who, as agents of a ruthless foreign imperialism, would destroy the freedom of their own country. We do not hear so much about a "Sixth Column" of those who don't care.

Do not allow our form of government and our form of social organization to be run down and depreciated. Other forms of government may seem to be more efficient; they may be more streamlined; they may make the trains run on time, and even make jay-walkers keep in step; but as systems based on compulsion and not on the free will of the citizen, they bear within them the seeds of their own destruction. I have heard it put this way. Despotism may be compared to a fast, sleek, high and dry steamer which moves over the waves with efficiency and despatch until it runs into an iceberg, when it goes down with all hands. Democracy might be compared with a raft where the passengers very often have their feet wet, but which never sinks. Mr. Churchill, that master of imagery, once put it, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms which have been tried from time to time and have failed."

Nor do I think you will be deceived by the benefits of the so-called "People's Democracy", which has been defined as that kind of government "where the candidate you vote for cannot lose". There is nothing in that for Canadians. We are the citizens of a living, free, progressive democracy. Let us keep it that way. In doing so, there will be nothing more important than education, something which is far broader and better than learning the facts; education for citizenship, education which will help us to keep our heads and exercise our judgment, calmly and objectively, as citizens, in the face of the propaganda battering to which one is subjected from every quarter by all the mechanisms of science. It is, indeed, hard to come to a conclusion today based on sober judgment when the mind and the heart are under a continuous assault from every agency which can be brought to bear on them - the press, the radio, television, the movies and others.

Let us remember also that we in Canada are the citizens of a land of many peoples, that there are rich strains woven into the complex but coherent pattern of our democracy. This gives it life, variety, and richness.

From these we must develop and maintain a united nation, from sea to sea, above the petty squabbles of its lesser citizens who would degrade it to the level of separate and suspicious groups and sections and races.

I wish I could put what I feel about my own country, and what I know you feel about it, in a single paragraph. The best, however, I can do is to repeat to you what one non-Canadian said about it:

"Canada, strong in the equal partnership of two great races, illustrious in peace and in war, a mighty mother of men, a great garden of the fruits of the earth and beloved for the glory of mountain, river, prairie and lake and all the delicate and changing beauties of sun and of snow."
