



The State of Respect

In many ways, respect among people is the foundation of civilized society. We need to respect our institutions and leaders as well. But in today's critical world, they will have to earn it. And so will we all, for respect begins at home . . .

□ The notion of what constitutes respect has changed radically since Francis Bacon wrote about it in his essays in the late 1500's. At that time, to have respect for persons was to discriminate in their favour under the influence of wealth or power. Thus a judge, as Bacon once was, might "respect" a nobleman by not prosecuting him for an offence he had committed. The injustice of this moved the great English philosopher and man of affairs to conclude: "Respect for persons is not good."

Over the years, the term assumed the more general meaning of deference to those of noble birth or high office. People automatically paid respect to those above them in social rank. But the fact that it was automatic does not necessarily mean that it was voluntary. Persons of "gentle" blood had it in their power to ruin underlings who were not sufficiently servile to them. The iron hand was always firmly inside the velvet glove of the class society.

Today we have come almost full circle from the concept of respect prevalent in Bacon's England — almost, but not quite, for the iron hand approach still lingers in some corners of our society. Hockey coaches are quoted on sports pages saying things like, "We've got to go out there and make them respect us," meaning that they have instructed their players to try to intimidate the opposition. Gang bosses literally can't live without what they loosely call respect. To lose it is to invite a sudden and bloody death at the hands of upstarts. To gain or keep it is, to them, ample

reason to maim or murder other criminals who have made them "look bad" among their own kind.

For the most part, however, citizens of modern democracies do not regard respect as something that can be demanded or forced out of them. No longer does it flow vertically from the poorer to the richer, or from the weaker to the stronger. Rather, it spreads horizontally throughout the society.

It is a basic tenet of the unwritten social contract by which we live that all citizens possess equal rights unless they do something to forfeit them. It follows that all are entitled to have their fellow citizens respect those rights. Just as our system accepts that people are innocent until proven guilty, we informally accept that they are worthy of respect until they lose it. Used as a verb, the word means to "pay heed to" — as in paying heed to another's feelings and rights.

The idea of this underlying respect for a person's humanity is eloquently expressed in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* by the wife of the figure in the title. She says: "Willie Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be paid . . ."

Not only does respect call upon us to take heed of the interests of others, it also decrees that we refrain from interfering with them. To respect people generally is to avoid insulting or degrading or

injuring them when they have done nothing to us. Without this mass accommodation, there would be no hope of running a heterogeneous, egalitarian society such as we have in Canada. The world, unfortunately, is littered with examples of the terrible things that happen when groups in a country fail to respect the human rights of other groups.

One stage up from the basic respect for humanity is the kind of respect which dictionaries define as the "deferential esteem felt or shown towards a person of quality." The order of the words indicates a reversal of priorities from the old days, when members of the masses were expected to bow and doff their caps to gentlefolk. It was then a case of demonstrating respect even when one did not feel it. People today do not go out of their way to show respect unless it is felt.

No more does it depend on the station in life of the subject. We have come around to agreeing with the 19th century English dramatist Douglas Jerrold that "many a man who now lacks shoe-laces would wear golden spurs if knighthood were the reward of worth." All but the few snobs among us would be as quick to show respect to a poor widow as to a millionaire. Granted, we may feel "deferential esteem" for a person who has reached a certain status in the world through solid achievement. But respect can never again be taken for granted; it must be earned.

*"I hate his guts, but
I respect those guts"*

What do we respect in a person? Any list would have to include attainment, integrity, fortitude, wisdom, skill and courage. Above all, we respect something inexplicable called character, which brings together all of these traits. Perhaps the closest anyone has come to accurately defining character was the Scottish theologian Cunningham Geikie. He called it "the stamp on our souls of the free choices of good and evil we have made through life."

We may, however, have a particular regard for a part of a person's character without appreciating the whole of it. One will often hear it said, "I don't have much use for him personally, but I've got a lot of respect for his ability." Respect requires

neither affinity nor affection. A boxer once complimented his future opponent's courage in a paradoxical style when he said: "I hate his guts, but I respect those guts."

There are exceptions to the rule of feeling respect before we show it which reach straight into the heart of our social system. A private soldier who salutes an officer passing by is according recognition to the latter's position of responsibility and leadership regardless of the personal character of the man who wears the pips. We call the mayors of our towns and cities "Your Worship" no matter what we think of their ethics or capabilities. We might send a letter to a stranger addressing him as "Very Reverend Sir" in the absence of any evidence that he is actually worthy of our reverence. All we know is that civilization demands civilities.

Such gestures amount to an unconscious acknowledgement that we live within a system that deserves our deference. We respect it because it respects us by upholding our human rights. For instance, we address our judges as "Your Honour" and rise when they enter the courtroom. In this way we do homage to a system of justice which — despite its occasional well-publicized lapses — warrants the high regard of those who live under it. It is instructive that when someone is cited for contempt of court, it is not because the accused has shown contempt for the person of the judge, but for the system the judge represents.

Respect for institutions is the cornerstone of the social compliance which makes Canada a mainly orderly, law-abiding and peaceful country. We defer to our legal, political and religious establishments out of an informed civility. As Edward Gibbon pointed out in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, this compliance is fundamentally pragmatic. He wrote that "public virtue is derived from a strong sense of our own interest in the preservation and prosperity of the free government of which we are members." The Roman Empire, incidentally, began to crumble when its leaders forfeited the esteem of the citizenry.

The Canadian Parliament provides an example of institutional respect in action. While hurling scurrilous accusations and thinly veiled insults across the floor, Parliamentarians are careful to refer to one another as honourable ladies and gentlemen out of regard for the hallowed precincts in

which they stand. Anyone who follows the proceedings telecast from the House of Commons may find difficulty in mustering much esteem for the members as they raise their catcalls, drown out rival speakers, and thump their desks in juvenile displays of partisanship. Yet Canadians on the whole feel a reverence for the Parliamentary system and its traditions out of a realization that it is the core of our national heritage of justice, humanity and freedom. We therefore offer a blanket respect for the members, not on the basis of their performance or personalities, but of the majestic establishment to which they belong.

*We know too much about them
to be free with our esteem*

There have no doubt been many times in history when all dignity was abandoned on the floor of the Commons in the heat of political struggles. But that was before the public could watch the members perform their antics live and in colour. People once gave their respect to Parliamentarians sight unseen, but not any longer — not when television keeps its steely eye on their every move.

The same is true of every other sector of public life; the people now can see what is happening. And public life now takes in all manner of activities that were once conducted behind closed doors. Businessmen, labour leaders, athletes, artists, entertainers and professional people all find themselves propelled from time to time into the spotlight. It is hard to keep a secret any more, and new freedom of information legislation will make it harder still.

The woods of public life are full of critical snipers who naturally aim at the biggest targets first; and there is nothing dignified about a man scrambling for cover. Investigative journalists maintain a constant patrol for evidence of venality, duplicity, extravagance, or simple human weakness. It being a rule of journalism that "good news is no news," what the public gets to know about the high and mighty is hardly likely to present them in a favourable light.

Another rule of journalism is that nothing should be taken on faith. Too often, situations are not in fact what their principals make them out to be. In their zeal for uncovering the "inside story," the media sometimes overstep the line, and innocent

people are defamed by innuendo which cannot be erased by liable suits. Nevertheless, the media have exposed real evils often enough to instil a mood of suspicion in the public. Treated to scandal after scandal, and to equally scandalous attempts to cover them up, people are reluctant to accept anyone's word for anything anymore.

*The demolition of legends
leaves little to admire*

The spread of scepticism has reached the point where it has become part of western culture. Books debunking historical beliefs regularly reach the best-seller lists. "Now-it-can-be-told" accounts of famous events reveal dishonour, pettiness and incompetence among revered historical figures. A National Film Board documentary recently savaged the legend of one of Canada's most cherished heroes, Billy Bishop, the World War I flying ace.

The relentless demolition of admirable traditions (even when it is mere fictional speculation on the author's part) has left people with little solid good to cling to in history. In the meantime, satirists have been wielding their lethal intellectual weapon in all the media to ensure that no person or institution is immune from ridicule. Some of the satire they dispense would have outraged the people of a more reverent era. Today people laugh approvingly, suspecting that there is more truth than fancy in the humorists' jibes.

Out of this mood has come a near-reversal of the theory that a person is innocent until proven guilty, at least in the informal court of public opinion. Anyone who does anything that affects the public is called to account in the dock of the mass media, where a thoughtless slip in phrasing can sentence a reputation to death. This may be unfair, but it is a reality. The most anyone who wishes to secure public respect can do is follow the advice of a Canadian big businessman who said: "Never do anything you wouldn't want to be interviewed about on TV."

Respect clearly cuts two ways. If people in positions which formerly commanded automatic respect find that it is lacking, they should think about returning more of it to the people. When we see politicians and officials abusing public money and



businessmen and labour leaders determined to go their own way regardless of the effects on the community, we feel that we are being treated with contempt, and we are ready to return it in kind.

Yet in a democracy the people are ultimately responsible for the state of affairs. Anybody who complains that there is no respect anymore might as well be talking into a mirror. If, as some say, children don't respect their parents, if students don't respect their teachers, if there is disrespect for the law, we should ask ourselves where it all begins.

If there is a general lack of respect for the political and social system, it should be kept in mind that, as citizens, we *are* the system. In the words of the immortal comic strip character, Pogo, "We have seen the enemy and he is us." We cannot disrespect the system without to some degree disrespecting ourselves.

Society seen as a fabric woven from mutual respect

Self-respect is more than an individual concern. In his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*, the American philosopher John Rawls wrote that it is a vital social value. Rawls views society as a fabric woven of all the associations in which people participate. To contribute positively to an association — a family or anything else — one must have self-respect.

Self-respect begets the respect of others in a group; at the same time it is reinforced by the respect of others. Without it, Rawls wrote, "all desire becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism." How true: the first thing that happens to people who lose their self-respect is that they lose respect for everybody and everything. People who despise themselves may go through the obsequious motions of paying respect to others, but they are incapable of the real feeling because it can only grow out of self-esteem.

According to Rawls, shame is the guardian of respect. "Imagine," he wrote, "the example of someone who cheats or gives in to cowardice. By wrongly advancing his own interests, he has transgressed the rights of others . . . His conduct shows that he

has failed to achieve the good of self-command, and he has been unworthy of his associates upon whom he depends to confirm his sense of his own worth."

The modern philosopher might have been quoting from the Victorian statesman Edmund Burke, who observed that as long as shame keeps its watch, virtue is never wholly extinguished. What happens when shame deserts the scene? Obviously it takes with it the self-control which self-respect enforces. In the absence of self-control, there can be none of the civil control upon which we depend for our security. A Mexican song tells of a place without shame and hence without law and order. "... Only the winner is respected. That's why life is worth nothing in Guanajuato," the lyrics run.

Fortunately, that sense of civil self-interest of which Gibbon wrote is still at work. People know instinctively that when respect is lost, chaos takes over. There was a danger of that occurring in western countries in the 1960's, when radical youths rebelled against the elder generation. Their dissatisfaction — disrespect for the system, really — found its outlet in violent attacks on authority in every form.

To a large extent, the sixties radicals were revolting against the concept of respectability then current in both public and private affairs. It did not matter much what one did to merit respect as long as one appeared respectable. Extreme as their tactics were, we can thank the young crusaders for bringing shame on this social hypocrisy. The hard-minded iconoclasm of the media at present was one lasting result of their revolt.

Having done their work of ensuring that respectability must be founded in conduct that deserves respect, the radicals and hippies of yesteryear have become content to wear jackets and ties and display acceptable manners. But in the atmosphere of openness which they created, it remains for society to build a new and more solid base of self-respect. This will only be done by placing a higher premium on individual character. We cannot demand character from our leaders unless we demand it from ourselves; for each of our lives is a thread in the fabric of mutual respect of which our society is composed.