



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 55, No. 3

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, MARCH 1974

### *Dialogue, Persuasion and Common Sense*

OF ALL THE USES to which human speech may be put, one is more interesting, more useful, and more powerful than the others. It is the use of speech to influence behaviour, sell goods or inspire ideas.

Business and social life include every kind of interchange which proceeds by way of persuasion. The thrill of winning a new customer, the delight in gaining a friend, and the satisfaction of making a point in favour of some community advancement: these are not surpassed by any other experience.

Not everyone needs to be a professional salesman, but everyone who seeks to lead people to his way of thinking is engaged in selling.

The principles of persuasion apply in many circumstances: public speaking, debate, dialogue, conversation, and salesmanship. Charles A. Fritz tells us in *The Method of Argument* (Prentice-Hall, 1931) that to influence people to change their opinions, or to do some work, or to support a project, requires an understanding of the laws of thought and of the motives of men and women.

There is a common illusion that the person who is silent in meetings and in social gatherings has something special in the way of intelligence, but the strong, silent person may be only dull. He will not accomplish much unless he becomes involved by joining the action.

Debate, which is one branch of persuasion, is a means of establishing the truth. Debate is give-and-take. If you want to speak your mind freely, you must let your opponents speak their minds freely, even when what they say collides with your vanity and violates your sense of what is fitting, or is violently opposed to your views and beliefs.

A debate is a clear-cut pro and con discussion of a question or assertion. In most public meetings the rules of parliamentary procedure are followed as a guide to fair play in the debates that arise. There must be some rules to hold the discussion to a definite point. This is also a requirement in private debates, but instead of a book of rules about sharing the time the participants rely upon a gentleman's agreement, and the person who transgresses it will be unpopular.

There are lonely debates, dialogues within our own minds. These are soliloquies in which we organize our thoughts and tot up the arguments for and against a course of action. For example, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is a succession of thrilling events — the assassination of Caesar, the oration of Marc Antony, and the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius — but we are reminded by Houston Peterson in *The Lonely Debate* (Reynal and Hitchcock, New York, 1938) that they are all foreshadowed by that hushed moment in Brutus's garden, when he broods over the waning liberties of Rome. "It must be by his death," says Brutus, and the fuse is lighted and the explosions follow.

#### *Dialogue is sharing*

Dialogue is the participation of people in the search for common values and their sharing of ideas as they deal with problems of joint concern. It is a conversation between two or more persons with a view to reaching an amicable agreement. Tossing an idea around in dialogue gets rid of a lot of chaff and makes the seed visible.

The way to prepare yourself is to participate in question and answer, in proposal and counter-proposal, and so to find areas of agreement and build upon them. It seems to enlightened persons that this is a better way to solve problems than raising an argument or doing battle.

Dialogue offers full scope for both good sense and good personality. The notions you express should be intrinsically reasonable, subject to amendment and yielding to improvement. The smile with which you present your point of view should show your personality. It springs from knowledge of your subject, belief in the integrity of what you sponsor, and a feeling of pleasure in being given the opportunity to speak. Personality is made up of many qualities of the mind and spirit: sincerity, the Golden Rule, knowledge and developed skill.

Just as a little discomfort is accepted as one of the occupational hazards of almost every job, so there

are difficult periods in any dialogue. All people have not bumped their heads against the same obstacles, so in a group there is bound to be diversity of experience described, variety of beliefs affirmed, and many opinions expressed. Some will be annoying and many of them may be infuriating. If, then, there is one virtue more than another that should be emphasized as an essential requirement in the person engaged in dialogue and persuasion, it is patient tact.

### *Persuasion: a wise man's argument*

There are two forms of intercourse between individuals and between groups: force and persuasion. Compulsion is a brute thing, a disclosure of one of the still unrefined crudities of civilization. If one party compels another to do something instead of persuading him, this is despotism, and it transgresses the principle of proper conduct sanctioned by an intellectually and spiritually refined society.

When we move from force to persuasion we take a step upward in intelligence and culture.

It is usually a weakling who runs away from persuasion. He does not want to risk being persuaded against his prejudices. A person with strength of character can listen to persuasion, weigh what is said, and arrive at informed conclusions.

Before engaging in persuasion, take time to settle a few questions in your own mind: What do I wish to accomplish? What are the interests of the people to whom I shall be talking? What are the facts I wish to tell them?

When a speaker seeks to bring about a change in belief or conduct, the hearer must not only understand and approve; he must accept. The speaker needs to minimize misunderstandings and difficulties by giving adequate explanations. "Because I say so" is not an acceptable or effective reason to give in dialogue, debate, or persuasion when recommending some action.

In selling, the person who relies upon argument is leaning on a weak reed. Persuasion in the prospect's interest is what wins sales.

Persuasion is based in large part upon knowing what makes people tick. This knowledge may be put to use through words or in pictures that appeal to one of the senses. Persuasion avoids a head-on collision about some doubtful point. It does not talk down to a person or a group.

A sense for human interest is a valuable asset to anyone indulging in persuasion. Human interest is what you notice that is of dominant interest in the person to whom you are presenting your case. Consider what will appeal to him. Whatever your objective, you must start with his present state of knowledge and belief.

A friendly attitude and the impression of being easy to talk with create an enormous amount of good will and predispose people to give you a sympathetic hearing. Two sayings from Mary Renault's best-

selling story of ancient Greece are fitting in his context: "It is no shame to make persuasion pleasing", and "If you want clear water, don't tease the squid."

### *Conciliation and compromise*

When speaking to an unfavourably-disposed audience or person the first task is to conciliate the people and break down prejudice. He is a clever person who, under these circumstances, succeeds in bringing a state of urbanity into a gathering that is marked by dissension.

Lester B. Pearson, statesman and diplomatist, said in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in Oslo: "The time has come for us to make a move . . . to concentrate on the possibilities of agreement."

When taking part in a committee or other meeting where diverging ideas have become evident, the person who believes in conciliation may say something like this: "It seems to me that there are three (or whatever the number may be) main points developed at this meeting. Would it not be reasonable for us to adopt such-and-such of the solution proposed by Mr. A and such-and-such a part from Mr. B's contribution, and work them in together with this proposal by Mr. C. This will enable us to formulate a proposed course of action that can be made the basis of fruitful discussion."

Such a procedure may be called "compromise" by some who detest the word, but it can be at times the intelligent approach to settlement and the essence of courageous wisdom. The words compromise, conciliation, mediation, and accommodation, signify partial acceptance of both sides of a dilemma that has baffled wise people. The proposed alternatives are not mutually exclusive, and ground is yielded on each side. In Charles Lamb's story of the invention of roast pork, people found that they did not have to burn down the cottage to roast the pig: they could have both cottage and savoury chops.

People have different reasons for opposing compromise. A fanatical person may object because he looks upon it as a sign of ignoble weakness. One who believes that he holds the key to truth and virtue can make no concessions to what he regards as vice or error. A romantic person does not object to compromise because it is ignoble, but because it is prosaic and undramatic: he wants to ride on to the stage like St. George, conquering dragons.

### *Desirable qualities*

There are some qualities that one should have before venturing upon debate, dialogue, or conciliation. They are: discrimination, preparation, factual knowledge, a wide view, belief in his cause, and honesty in presentation.

It is advisable to be discriminating when deciding upon the ideal or objective you choose to support or lead. This involves making judgments: to be discriminating, said Professor Edgar Dale of Ohio State

University, is not only to see differences and alternatives but to prefer the best.

Next is preparation. Planning will not take the place of inspiration and enterprise, but it is a necessary support of them. Before communicating, know your facts; before dialogue, know what the issue is; before persuading, know what the outcome entails; before co-operating, know that the combined effort is worth while.

It is vital to know what you are talking about, and to know why those with whom you are talking should be interested. You cannot rely upon your native ability to negotiate complex problems with spur of the moment thoughts.

Go right to the heart of the matter and find out just what issues have to be decided. Tidy up your mind, lay out your chain of reasoning, anticipate the objections and have the answers ready. Make preparations that are suitable to your best hopes. In persuasion as in scientific research, fortune favours the prepared mind.

Do not be skimpy in presenting facts. Qualities that seem obvious to you need to be presented so that your listeners see and understand them. This presentation should be clear, adequate, and convincing. It should introduce into the mind of the listener some picture of himself as a central figure, furthering a good cause, using a service or being admired for having a part in it.

Facts form the basis of all debate, all discussion and all persuasion. There can be little reasoning done without them. When you are short of information, make a telephone call, visit a library, or write a letter. The sources of data you can tap are boundless. But make sure that your facts are correct and your statistics meaningful. There was a ninety-year-old patient who assured his doctor that he was unlikely to die, because "statistics prove that few men die over ninety."

### *Open to new ideas*

A wide view is needed, taking into account not only the individual fragments of the course you are advocating, but everything that might affect its acceptance. Look for the consequences, the over-all effects of a change.

The conditions, influences and forces to which people are exposed are constantly changing. An appeal that might have been indisputably correct as your text a generation ago may have been made obsolete by new discoveries.

Being open to hearing a new idea is an intelligent approach to the affairs of life, even if we do not like the idea when we hear it. Be willing to listen to those who have prejudices. Nearly every prejudice started with a small truth. Separate the husk of prejudice from the truth it encloses and so get at the kernel within.

You will be encouraged and sustained in all these

endeavours if you believe whole-heartedly in the cause you are originating or supporting. The first person you have to persuade is yourself. Then back up what you say with high confidence in what you are saying. Be enthusiastic.

Be honest in all your persuasion. Do not overreach yourself in making promises. False promises made in the heat of debate or in the throes of selling a commodity are quickly revealed when the person you influence comes face to face with the reality.

Your listeners do not ask for perfection in the way you say things, but they do prefer the truth to fiction. It is painfully easy to widen the credibility gap. There is no one to be avoided with greater diligence than an eloquent man who does not speak the truth.

### *Reaching the audience*

The offering of reasons and of facts to support them is necessary, but it is not enough. The choice of the reasons and facts, the way you arrange them, and the words in which you present them, must be tailored to the personalities and interests of the people you expect to be influenced by them.

People who live differently think differently. A message that would win applause at a meeting of suburbanites might fall flat in a meeting of a city society or club. Talents and desires and interests and speed of mental pick-up vary.

The question to guide you is this: what does your idea offer to this particular gathering or this person in the way of advantage, prestige or happiness?

It is not enough to spread out your ideas in cafeteria style and stand back waiting for the prospect to decide what ones he wishes to accept, if any. Watch for opportunities to appeal to the impulses, instincts and emotions of those to whom you are talking. Among the powerful influences are: emotional motives like pride, innovation, emulation, or social prestige; rational motives like money gained or saved, economy, security, time-saving, and safety.

Reasonable people listen attentively to words that bear upon certain desires they have. It is not enough for human beings to enjoy the animal necessities, food, shelter and warmth. Humans have social needs and activities, produced in part by instinctive habit that is conditioned by good sense, in part by the compulsion exercised by other members of the community, and partly by persuasion. They replace old expectancies with new ones. One of these expectancies was voiced by William James, the noted psychologist: "The deepest need in human nature is the craving to be appreciated."

### *Be an outgoing person*

Impersonally presented reasons are not strong enough to move people away from their accustomed routines into some new mode of living. Be an outgoing person: give the listener a sense of raised ego by making clear to him that you are thinking of him in

his language, in terms of his interests, and along lines that will add to his satisfactions.

When you have convinced a person that you are genuinely interested in him and in what he says, and are eager for understanding agreement, you have progressed a long way toward your objective.

Making things simple does not mean that the writer or speaker must follow the rule once popular in books for children: use only one-syllable words. The use of more complicated words occasionally, and the use of ideas and quotations slightly above the habitual level of listening and reading, are flattering to the hearer or reader. People have to be taken out of their depth now and again if we wish to entice them to swim.

Do not smother your message under synthetic sweetness, phoney sentiment, unbelievable morality and contrived folksiness. Make no secret about what you wish to achieve. Tell your objective and your purpose in seeking it: add facts; give examples; focus on what is important, and ask for the action you desire.

### *Communication is needed*

We cannot succeed in persuading people unless we communicate clearly and accurately. Herein lies the skill or art of presenting ideas so as to convert neutral or negative attitudes toward them into positive agreement.

What is the best way to communicate knowledge? Here are some effective aids: 1) Use simple, correct, appropriate language; 2) Make the image you seek to convey clean-cut; 3) Place the image in the environment, not in some remote setting whence mental effort is needed to draw it into the picture.

As to how to attain all this, your style will help, though it is better to have something to say and to say it without literary polish than to say nothing beautifully. Your enthusiasm will turn apathy into interest. People respond to a person who is in earnest about a project.

Be courteous and tactful in dealing with people who disagree with you. Lots of sentimental things have been written and sung about a smile, but its plain, practical, value is easy to prove in the art of persuading. Even if you do not feel civil or cheerful, the mere fact that you assume the appearance helps you over troublesome periods. There is no more effective way to restore or raise your ego than by being courteous under difficulty.

Relax every once in a while to give your audience and yourself breathing space. Use ingenuity to release tension. When the United Nations was going through its critical fortnight in 1960, with the Assembly being harangued by political leaders from all over the world, and the delegates and workers needed relaxation, some genius had a bright idea. He brought the people, talking a score of different languages, into a hall to be entertained. And what language did the entertainers use? Not a spoken tongue, but a language common to

all mankind. Red Skelton diverted his audience with pantomime, and brought them all together in laughter.

### *Listen intelligently*

Persuasion is an intellectual process. With every advance in science and technology and management, the capacity for reasoning becomes more necessary.

Some persons shy away from the thought of intelligence and from people who have the reputation of being intelligent. Charles Kingsley wrote: "Be good, sweet maid, and let who can be clever." This is the shockingly simplistic alternative which is accepted by many as being a matter of course—the choice between goodness and intelligence. Everyone who listens with care to what is going on in the world knows that goodness and cleverness are not mutually exclusive.

Lots of would-be persuaders are like Marc Antony. They cry out "Lend me your ears!" But in these days the people are shouting back: "Now, *you* listen to me. I have an identity and I have intelligence, and I want to have my say."

It is only by listening that we get the other person's arguments and viewpoint. There is a difference in thinking between the person who grows wheat on the prairies and the person who earns his living in a factory in the east. It is not merely a difference of economic thought about what to work at, what to buy, what taxes one should pay, and the relative worth of equalization payments to the provinces. Different environments create differing philosophies of life.

No one will learn the art of dialogue by reading books or studying papers like this one, which are only guides, but there is one lesson to be learned no matter to what schoolmaster you go: use common sense.

Looked at practically, common sense is seen to be the result of the sum total of unconscious impressions in the ordinary occurrences of life as they are treasured up in the memory and called out by the occasion.

Common sense enables us to judge the meaning and worth of a statement, a promise, a proposal or a plan by criteria that are too many and too refined to be all distinctly recollected, but which do not therefore operate the less powerfully upon the mind. By putting this past experience of ours to work we find that we feel and know much more than we can pin down with reasons or express in neatly-rounded statements.

Reasonable words, supported by facts and inspired by enthusiasm and bounded by common sense can solve problems and tranquillize quarrels. Dialogue replaces browbeating and storming, and wins by the use of methods that belong to a mature and intelligent person.

In selling goods or services or an idea through dialogue, one must arouse interest, establish confidence, create favourable reactions, meet and overcome objections, and close the sale. This path must be followed in any circumstance where you are proposing rational action.