

THE PRESENT STATUS OF CIVIL SERVICE REFORM.

It is always a pleasure to be able to report definite, tangible progress in any reform movement. For a long time the voices of the men who inveighed against the foul spoils system were voices crying

in the wilderness, and the bulk of our people regarded the speakers merely with that good-natured amusement too often vouchsafed by the average American to a movement which does not seem to have

240 *The Present Status of Civil Service Reform.* [February,

immediately ahead of it a paid return. But this stage has now been left behind. We have extended the national civil service law to cover so large a portion of the public service that we are past the period of agitation, past the period of mere experiment, and have reached a time when the new system exists side by side, in almost equal strength, with the old.

In 1883 the civil service law was established at Washington, and in the larger post-offices and custom-houses throughout the country, taking in a total of some fourteen thousand employees. The great extensions since have all taken place during the last six years, a period which happens to include my own term of service with the Commission, so that I write of them at first hand. In 1889 the railway mail service was added, in 1893 all the free delivery post-offices, and in 1894 all the smaller custom-houses and the internal revenue service. Other important but smaller extensions have been made, and the larger offices have grown, so that now about fifty thousand employees are under the protection of the law. There are, of course, and there always must be in a body so large, individual cases where the law is evaded, or even violated; and as yet we do not touch the question of promotions and reductions. But, speaking broadly, and with due allowance for such comparatively slight exceptions, these fifty thousand places are now taken out of the political arena. They can no longer be scrambled for in a struggle as ignoble and brutal as the strife of pirates over plunder; they no longer serve as a vast bribery chest with which to debauch the voters of the country. Those holding them no longer keep their political life by the frail tenure of service to the party boss and the party machine; they stand as American citizens, and are allowed the privilege of earning their own bread without molestation so long as they faithfully serve the public.

The classified service, the service in

which the merit system is applied, has grown fast. It is true that the outside service, where the spoils theories are still applied in all their original nakedness, has grown only less fast. The number of offices under the government has increased very rapidly during the last twenty years; but the growth of the classified service has been even more rapid, so that a constantly increasing percentage of the whole is withdrawn from the degrading grasp of the spoils system. Now, something like a quarter of all the offices under the federal government in point of numbers, representing nearly a half in point of salaries, has been put upon the basis of decency and merit. This has been done by the action of successive Presidents under the law of 1883, without the necessity of action by Congress. There still remain some things that can be done without further legislation. For instance, the labor force in the navy yards was put on a merit basis, and removed from the domain of politics, under Secretary Tracy. This was done merely by order of the Secretary of the Navy, which order could have been reversed by his successor, Secretary Herbert. Instead of reversing it, however, Secretary Herbert has zealously lived up to its requirements, and has withstood all pressure for the weakening of the system in the interests of the local party machines and bosses. It is unsafe to trust to always having Secretaries of the Navy like Messrs. Tracy and Herbert. The Civil Service Commission should be given supervision over the laborers who come under the direction of Cabinet officers. Indeed, all the laboring force and all the employees of the District of Columbia employed by the federal government should be put under the Commission.

When this has been done, and when a few other comparatively slight extensions have been made, all that can be accomplished by the unaided action of the executive will have been accomplished.

Congress must then itself act by passing some such bill as that of Senator Lodge in reference to fourth-class postmasters; by passing some bill in reference to the consular service on the outlines of that suggested by Senator Morgan (but giving power to the Civil Service Commission itself in the matter); and then by providing that all postmasters and similar officers shall hold office during good behavior, including as well those nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate as those appointed by the President alone. Of all the offices under the federal government, not one in a hundred can properly be called political. There is not the least reason why the present postmaster of Boston, for instance, or the present postmaster of Chicago, both of whom have lived up to the civil service law in letter and in spirit alike, should not be retained under a Republican as well as under a Democratic administration; exactly as there is no reason why their predecessors, who were Republicans, should not have been retained under the present administration. Mr. Hesing, the present postmaster at Chicago, and Mr. Coveney, the present postmaster at Boston, have been uninfluenced by political considerations in making appointments to and removals from the classified service of their post-offices. Their duty is to do the business of the public interested in their respective post-offices. Their views on the tariff, or on questions of finance, or on questions of foreign policy have nothing whatever to do with the way that they administer their offices.

This is not a question of theory. It is a statement of fact. There is no possible reason why, under a protectionist administration, the postmaster at New York or Philadelphia should not be a free-trader, or *vice versa*, so long as he administers his office in the best possible manner, and so long as he does not take any prominent part in politics so as to cause friction or scandal in the adminis-

tration of his office. There is no hardship in requiring a civil servant thus not to take part in politics. For excellent reasons, we forbid certain civil servants — judges and policemen, for instance — and all military servants — officers of the army or navy — from meddling in politics. The same reasons that make this proper in their cases would make it proper in the cases of postal clerks, letter-carriers, and government employees generally who are protected by the civil service law.

There is not the least danger of government employees taking too little interest in politics; there is a real and great danger of their taking too much, when their positions depend upon their activity. The minute that we make men's bread and butter depend upon their political action, that action ceases to be influenced by considerations of the public weal, and is taken from considerations of private benefit. We therefore, under the spoils system, substitute in those most active in our political life the motive of private interest for the motive of devotion to the public welfare. That the effect is necessarily very bad scarcely needs argument.

Dishonest politicians, and foolish men who are not dishonest, but who are never willing to see good done in a practical manner, always try to belittle the effects of the civil service law. Politicians of this type are fond of denouncing it as impractical or visionary. At one time these accusations undoubtedly had weight with certain parts of the community, but they have lost their point now, for the law is actually in operation in many different places throughout the country, and every one can see how well it is working. If a man who lives in one of our great cities or in Washington questions this, all he has to do is to go to his local post-office and see the working for himself. I should be glad to have any reader of *The Atlantic* who looks at this article write to the Commission, and I will give

him a letter to the secretary of our local board, if he happens to live in a city large enough to have a good-sized free delivery office, and he can visit it for himself and see how the law is working. He will find that in most cases, and in the larger cities in practically all cases, men are appointed and retained without regard to politics, and that the postal employees no longer form a considerable element in the political machines through which so much of our municipal misgovernment is attained.

The weak-kneed man, or the man discontented with present conditions on mere theoretical grounds, sometimes rails at the law because it does not work perfectly in all cases. This is, unfortunately, true. There are a number of the smaller post-offices, there are occasional bureaus in the departmental service itself, in which there has been some evasion, and even some actual violation of the law. It is the duty of every public man to point out and denounce such evasion or violation, and the Commission is most anxious that this should be done; but it is mere nonsense to assail the whole law because it does not always work well. Every year there are unwise decisions rendered by United States judges in individual cases, yet no one dreams of denouncing our judiciary for this. The best of laws cannot invariably work justice. The thing to be done is, not to rail at the law because it fails to work faultlessly, but to strive to perfect it, to enlarge the scope of its activity, and to limit even further the number of cases where it may fail to do the hoped-for good.

It is true that we can never hope to make a reformation by legislation alone. There must be a spirit behind the law in its favor, and there must be a faithful and wise enforcement of the law. Nevertheless, it is also true that without the law itself the reform cannot come at all. The very existence of the law and its successful working tend to create a healthy

public sentiment in favor of the movement back of it. There is urgent need of rigid and severe criticism of those who administer the law; not only of the Civil Service Commissioners, but of the heads of the departments and of the executive officers generally. So there is urgent need of close supervision over Congressmen in relation to their action concerning it. Every decent man who believes that he ought to be a good citizen should study the question, and if he does he will inevitably become a friend of the merit system, and an opponent of the old, or patronage system. Then, having formed his opinion, it is his duty to make it felt in public life. The most effective way to do this is to keep an intelligent watch on the action of his own Congressman or of his own state legislator in reference to it. In Congress, the law has on its side the general sentiment in favor of decency and good government, and has against it the very concrete and active sentiment of those specifically interested in misgovernment and in foul politics. The Congressman who gets his nomination by his manipulation of fourth-class post-offices, or who makes himself felt as an influential man in his district by peddling out patronage; he who knows that the decent men of his district are against him, and that he must rely on the strength of those who can be bought or bribed with office when they cannot be cajoled or flattered, — all these naturally take an attitude of active hostility to the reform. Every such Congressman should be made to feel the weight of his constituents' ill will; he should be made to understand that decent men of intelligence will not tolerate his position.

The government cannot endure permanently if administered on a spoils basis. If this form of corruption is permitted and encouraged, other forms of corruption will inevitably follow in its train. When a department at Washington, or at a state capitol, or in the city hall in

some big town is thronged with place-hunters and office-mongers who seek and dispense patronage from considerations of personal and party greed, the tone of public life is necessarily so lowered that the bribe-taker and the bribe-giver, the blackmailer and the corruptionist, find their places ready prepared for them.

As always, the bad man has his natural ally in the stupid man. Exactly as every corrupt scoundrel who cheats and swindles in public life may count upon the support of a certain number of honest dolts, so the spoilsman, when he rails at the law, can count as an ally upon the dense unintelligence of a certain portion of our people. This is the man who occasionally — only occasionally, for his thoughts, as a rule, are too misty to be formulated in words — asks why, if we choose letter-carriers by competitive examination, we should not choose higher officers, too; why, if we don't want politics in the lower grades, we should have them in the higher. Of course the answer is perfectly simple: in each instance we choose with reference to the duties, which in one case are purely political, and in the other not political at all. We need different methods of choice for precisely the same reasons that we need different tests in choosing commanders in chief and private soldiers. To change government clerks because we change Presidents is as absurd as it would have been to turn out the rank and file of the Army of the Potomac when Meade succeeded Hooker.

Experience shows that we can get admirable material for letter-carriers through competitive examinations; and experience shows further that at present it is only through competitive examinations that we can keep out political influence in the appointment and retention of these letter-carriers and similar officials. We make no fetish of the competitive system; on the contrary, we are fully alive to its shortcomings. But, as a matter of fact, it works well where it

has been applied in our American public service. We have steadily tended to make it more practical. For instance, last summer, in comparing the question papers used in the British post-office with those of our own postal examinations, I was struck by the fact that ours were decidedly more practical; the questions asked being more relevant to the duties performed, and better fitted to test the intelligence of the applicants in the lines where that intelligence was to be used. It may be that, a century hence, when we have succeeded in completely eliminating from the minds of the people the idea of making appointments to these minor places for merely political reasons, and when there is no danger of giving a new lease of life to the monstrous spoils system, it will be safe to substitute something else for our competitive examinations; but no such substitution can safely be made now. At the present time and under existing conditions, the system of competitive examinations for minor offices is the only feasible alternative to the spoils system, and is immeasurably and beyond all comparison better. It is inferior in no respect; it is superior in almost every respect; and it is infinitely superior in many respects.

We strive to eliminate politics in the lower offices without trying to eliminate them in the higher, because we pay heed to the duties of the several positions. The higher officers of the administration, — ambassadors, heads of departments, chiefs of bureaus, the men who have a discretion and initiative in administering the laws, — all these should rightly be changed with each administration, because the very principles which they are to enforce are those that have been decided in the election. But the immense number of minor officers, going right up to and including all postmasters, should not be changed, because their duties are in no way connected with the principles at stake in any election.

This is just as true of the servants of

the State and of the municipality as of the servants of the United States. We have as yet only begun to eliminate the spoils system from our political life. There is work for at least another generation of reformers before the task will be even measurably complete; for we have got to extirpate the system not only from the federal government, but from every State and city in the land. The argument of those who think that the mere subordinates should conform in politics to their chiefs is like the argument so often advanced by defenders of civic misrule, to the effect that if we take partisan considerations into account in electing the President of the United States, we should also take them into account in electing, for instance, the mayor of New York. The answer to this is of course simple: we do pay heed to "party" considerations in municipal elections; but the lines of party cleavage in municipal elections need not coincide with, and may go at right angles to, the lines of party cleavage in national elections. Party may mean one thing in the municipality, and quite another thing in the nation. There was a contest between two parties in New York city, last fall, over municipal matters; and there was also a contest in New York city, as well as throughout the country, over the control of Congress. In fighting for the control of Congress, the two parties divided on such issues as free trade and protection. In fighting for the control of New York city, the two parties divided on entirely different issues, the chief of the issues being whether or no the government of the city should be administered honestly and economically, or whether or no the public servants of the city should be allowed to treat their offices as so much loot for the use of themselves and their friends. The parties in this municipal contest divided on the simple lines of honesty and dishonesty; which had nothing to do with the party divisions in national matters on the

questions of protection and free trade and of our foreign relations.

If people would only think clearly on the matter, it would be plain enough. For the general convenience, the government administers certain offices itself, instead of allowing them to be administered by private corporations, which may often do similar work. Thus, with us, letters are carried by the government; parcels, by the different private express companies. The letter-carrier's duties have no more to do with the policies fought over in a presidential election than have the duties of the expressman who takes around our trunks and delivers our bundles. Nobody would dream of thinking that the expressman would be either more or less faithful to his duties because he did or did not agree with the head of his company, or with the administration for the time being, on questions of finance or tariff; and it is foolish to say that this is not equally true of the letter-carrier. If the people wish the best of all possible object lessons as to the successful working of the merit system, they can take the railway mail service. When the present administration came into power, this service was under the protection of the law. Up to that time every change of administration had seen the service not under the law, and in each case it had been looted from top to bottom. The result was total demoralization of the service, and a tendency to even greater demoralization in the politics of the communities among which the offices were peddled out. It took at least two years in each instance to get the service back to its former degree of efficiency. But in 1893 the law had been established. In consequence, nobody was jeopardized for his political belief. The railway mail clerks knew that if they attended to their business, and were not improperly active in politics, they would be kept just so long as they did good work. The result has been that the railway mail clerks who

are now in are rendering admirable service; and the railway mail system is at a point of efficiency higher than ever before. The same men are in now who were in four years ago under the Republican administration, except that the vacancies naturally occurring have been filled, without regard to politics, from the list of persons standing best in the examinations. Through this means we have procured a much better grade of people than formerly came into the railway mail service; and owing to the fact that they are not chosen for political reasons, and not liable to be removed for political reasons, they do better and more effective work. Not an objection raised by the spoilsmen but can be answered through the actual experience of the railway mail service.

The reform has now begun to make way by its own weight. People are growing to realize that the civil service law is the most trenchant of weapons with which to fight political corruption, and the best device by which to secure good administration. When any group of citizens wishes that one branch of the service should be kept in particularly good order, the instinct is to turn to the civil service law. Thus, when there was widespread indignation among merchants and importers over the looting of the consular service, eighteen months ago, the boards of trade throughout the country took action strongly advocating the introduction of a merit system which would insure the appointment of competent people, and their retention, without regard to politics, just as long as they did their work well. So in Chicago, recently, when there was a feeling of bitter indignation against the mismanagement and corruption of certain branches of the city government, this feeling found immediate expression in the demand that some civil service law should be forthwith enacted for the protection of the citizens.

We are as yet very far from having achieved a permanent victory for the

merit system, but we have made great progress. We have shown by actual trial, continued for a long term of years, that under the civil service law we can get better administration than under the spoils system, and that through it we can most effectively curb the noxious power of the ring and the boss. There is very much yet to be done. We must work zealously and disinterestedly for the widespread extension and rigid application of the law, not only in the federal service, but in the state and municipal services as well. We must ask for additional legislation by Congress and by the state legislatures, and must insist upon the enactment of laws that will remove from politics all the non-political offices, from those of postmasters to those of laborers on the public works of great cities. We must keep a jealous eye on the action of our legislators, and on the action of our executive officers who have to deal with the administration of the law. We must uphold them with hearty good will when they do right. We must condemn them without stint when they fail to stand by the law. We must make it evident that, however strong party men we may individually be, we will never allow the cry of party to be used as a shield in the defense of a man who maladministers the law, any more than we should allow it to be used on behalf of a man who acted dishonestly or corruptly in public or private life.

Civil service reform is of marked business benefit to the country; it can stand on its merits as a business proposition. But it is much more than a business proposition. Its prime importance lies in the fact that it is the most powerful implement with which to work for the moral regeneration of our public life. No other force so strongly tends to increase the political weight of decent citizens, and to minimize the political activity of the bad.

Finally, among the many benefits of

the law, not the least is the bar it puts to discrimination for or against a man because of his religious convictions. Protestant and Catholic, Jew, Gentile, and Agnostic, are treated with an equal hand. I named above the postmasters of Chicago and Boston as being staunch upholders of the civil service law. Both of these officers happen to be Catholics, one being of German and the other of Irish ancestry; but both are themselves Americans in every sense of the word. Those of their employees who happen to be Protestants and Republicans are treated, and know they will be treated, wholly without regard to their political or religious affiliations; and all applicants for the service stand on the same plane and have equal chances, no matter what their creed or their party. It was the

same under the Republican predecessors of the present postmasters of Chicago and Boston. They happened to be Protestants; but when they left office it was found that, thanks to the zeal with which they had obeyed the law, Catholics and Democrats had entered the service under them as freely as Protestants and Republicans. All had done their duty alike, and all had been treated alike. It seems to me that this procedure under the civil service law could with advantage be pondered by those citizens who strive to bring into our political life questions of religious belief; who seek either to use church influence improperly on the one hand, or, on the other, to discriminate against worthy Americans because of their creed or their race origin.

Theodore Roosevelt.