

CIVIL SERVICE REFORM.*

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THE first thing to do in writing about the civil service is to explain what the civil service is. A great many people appear profoundly ignorant of this. Ardent advocates of the spoils system are fond of saying, "I am against civil service," a statement which well reflects their intelligence as their words, taken literally, mean that they favor only the military servants of the republic. Of course what they really mean is that they are against having the merit system of making appointments to and removals from office applied to the civil service.

The civil service includes all the government employees who are not in the military or naval service of the republic. These are

about one hundred and seventy thousand in number. Most of them are still appointed under the old system ; that is, the appointments are made nominally by the heads of offices, really by the congressmen or local politicians of influence, and they are all changed with every change of administration, save in the rare cases in which the position is so difficult that only one particular man can hold it to public advantage, or in the more common but still rather infrequent instances where the office is of such small importance that no one of the dominant party cares for it. However, of the civil service about a fifth, or thirty-four thousand places in all, are classified and are more or less under the control of the Civil Service Commission. These thirty-four thousand places include the great bulk of the best

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paid positions, their aggregate salaries being nearly as great as the aggregate salaries of all of the remaining people in the civil service. Taken as a whole, these thirty-four thousand people may be said now to be out of politics, and are appointed to office and removed from office without regard to their political opinions or their religious beliefs, and without reference to the politics of the administration in power for the time being.

The "clean sweep" policy—in other words the thorough application of that pernicious and degrading maxim, "to the victors belong the spoils"—is applied elsewhere in the service; all the fourth-class post offices, laborers' places, collectorships of internal revenue, etc., being treated as so much plunder and being regularly looted by the incoming party, whether Republican or Democratic, with the worst possible results, not merely to the efficiency of the service, but far more to the purity of American public life. But the thirty-four thousand places, including all the clerks at Washington, all the employees of the railway mail service, and the letter carriers, and other employees in the big post offices and customhouses throughout the country, are under the merit system, being in what is called the classified service. These men are appointed upon open competitive examination, merely for their merit, and are retained in the service as long as they give satisfaction to the public.

Of course even in the classified service unscrupulous politicians, helped by the supineness or indifference of good men both in and out of office, are enabled to do a certain amount of mischief; and there are certain offices, *e. g.*, the office at Baltimore, in which it has long been extremely difficult to prevent evasions of the law and the abuse of the public service, under Democrats and Republicans alike. But taken as a whole, substantial justice is done, and this is notably true of the departments in Washington, because these departments are under the Commission's eye, while the very insufficient sum allowed the Commission by Congress for traveling expenses renders it impossible to keep as thorough a supervision over the local offices as is desirable. The railway mail service is also under the immediate supervision of the Commission, and in consequence the law is excellently observed in this department.

For these reasons I shall speak chiefly of

the departmental service at Washington and of the railway mail service, though what I say will apply, with few and unimportant changes, to the service in the big local post offices and customhouses. Under the old system if a man wanted to procure a position in a department in Washington he had to get the backing of some prominent politician, and this meant that he and his friends first had to pester the aforesaid politician almost to death, and that then the politician himself had to pester the head of a department in Washington in similar manner until the latter gave the place; and under such circumstances the place was usually made vacant by turning out some perfectly competent unfortunate to whom it might be a matter of life or death to retain it, but who had no political influence. The offices were treated, as they are treated now in all parts of the service in which the civil service law does not afford protection, as great bribery chests out of which to pay influential henchmen for their political services.

It is quite needless to say that the system was corrupting and degrading to the last degree, and is so this moment just so far as it obtains; and it is not defensible on any ground of morality or decency. Not only did it and does it work harm to the public service, but what is of much more importance it works inestimable harm to American public life, tending to supplant the influence of honest citizens in our primaries and elections by the influence of organized bands of political mercenaries, who are paid out of the public treasury for the benefit of themselves and their leaders.

Probably no other one cause has done as much to degrade American politics as the spoils system. An election obtained by bribery with office is but one degree more disreputable than an election obtained by bribery with money; the difference is really not material.

Contrast this with the workings of the civil service law. Nowadays if a man or woman wants to get into the government service at Washington, or if a man wishes to be a railway mail clerk, there is no need of applying to any prominent politician. Indeed, such a politician could be of absolutely no service. The applicant for office merely writes to the Commission stating what position it is he desires. He receives in return a schedule of examinations, which are held in every state in the

Union at least twice a year, and he can choose the date and place most convenient for him. He is then examined in a thoroughly practical manner, so as to test his qualifications for the service which he is seeking to perform. If he wishes to be a clerk, for instance, he is required to show that he can spell well, that he can write a good hand, that he can copy accurately both from rough drafts and from plain copy, that he can write grammatically, and is proficient in simple arithmetic. If he has not the capacity to pass such an examination well he is certainly incapable of being an efficient government clerk; and if on the other hand he is able to pass the examination and is also of good moral character it is pretty sure he can do well in a government office.

If he wishes to be a railway mail clerk the chief weight in the examination is laid first upon his physical as well as his moral condition, and then upon the knowledge he has of the railway mail system in the division to which he seeks appointment, of his knowledge of United States geography, and of his skill and speed in reading addresses on letters. Again it will be noted that the examination is perfectly practical and relevant to the duties to be performed. If he seeks to be a letter carrier one of the main points upon which he is examined is his knowledge of the local delivery of his city.

Having passed the examination the candidate's papers are marked by a board of trained experts, who are ignorant of his name, marking him simply with reference to how he stands compared with his fellows. When the marks are completed then all the applicants are graded on the eligible registers according to their standing, and the highest are certified for appointment whenever a vacancy occurs. No vacancies are made in order to provide room for successful applicants, and every clerk in consequence feels absolutely secure in his position so long as he does his duty; whereas under the old system, as I was informed by Secretary Windom, the work fell off in each department something like twenty-five per cent before a change of administration merely because of the nervousness into which all the clerks were thrown by the uncertainty of their future consequent upon the change of parties.

Of course there are many positions for which expert knowledge is needed, and the examinations for these are very severe, and

properly so. Thus, entrance to the Patent Office is made through the grade of fourth assistant examiner, and no mere layman could pass the assistant examiner's examination. In a similar way the positions in the Nautical Almanac Office can be obtained only by people of exceptional mathematical capacity. Many of the positions under the Department of Agriculture also demand peculiar qualifications on the part of those seeking to fill them.

The Commission is required by law to apportion the appointments in Washington among the various states on the basis of their population, and at the present moment the states all stand substantially equal in regard to their quotas, save that two of those in the immediate vicinity of Washington are slightly ahead. This is because of the fact that they send so many people into the special examinations. It has now been five years since a single appointment from the clerk or copyist register has been made from Maryland or Virginia, because the clerk and copyist registers from other states are always fairly well supplied with applicants, so that there is never any dearth among them which would warrant the Commission in giving a position to either of these two states. But in the special examinations it will often occur that there will be but one or two men in the whole country both willing and competent to fill the places sought, and in consequence for these places applicants from the two states in question have to be admitted.

One of the gratifying things of our work during the last four years has been the way in which the quotas of the southern states have been filled. There was at first under the present administration some reluctance to come forward from these southern states; but the Commission made special efforts and held a special tour of examinations through them, explaining in full that no discrimination would be made because of color, politics, or religion. As a consequence they now have their quotas full. Perhaps three fourths of the men from the South Atlantic and Gulf states that have thus received appointments during the last four years are whites and Democrats, who were thus given office under a Republican administration purely because of their merit. The others are colored, also appointed simply upon the record they made in competitive examination. This result has therefore been gratifying in a

double aspect ; in the first place, by securing the appointment of these numerous southern Democrats, the Commission was able to offer a practical guarantee of its impartiality ; and in the second place, by throwing open work in the public service to the best educated and most intelligent people of color, a new avenue to honorable independence was offered to the very people against whom most of the doors of success in the professions are barred.

The first step, and a very important advance along the lines of civil service reform, has been made recently in the classification of the educational branch of the Indian service. In no one division of our government has the spoils system worked greater harm than in the Indian service. It is an utter absurdity from the standpoint of good government to change an efficient postmaster, whose duties to the public are purely to see that the letters are delivered with expedition and sureness, because that postmaster happens to disagree in reference to the tariff or the currency with the man who is last elected president of the United States ; and it is of course a potent source of corruption in our public life to throw these offices in to be scrambled for as the rewards of political success along very dirty lines ; but the immediate material damage to the community resulting from any such change is less than would be expected. The average community is composed of civilized beings, well aware of their rights and competent to guard them, and if any postmaster, for instance, proves very inefficient such a chorus of indignant protests arises even among the adherents of the dominant party that the man is forced to mend his ways or to resign his position.

But all this is changed on the Indian reservations. Here we have a group of ignorant beings unable to protect themselves, who are slowly and feebly struggling toward civilization, and who need every ounce of assistance that can possibly be given them. They are suspicious ; they are timid in asserting their rights, and yet are easily misled into deeds of violence that necessarily demand punishment. They are not able to make themselves heard in protest and complaint, and a bad man holding an influential position over them can do them irreparable harm with little difficulty. Such being the case, it is nothing short of criminal to treat the offices

on Indian reservations with the rewards of partisan activity without any heed to the welfare of the Indians themselves ; yet this is what has been done right along by every party. It is painful to the last degree to see a tribe that is making progress toward civilization under a capable and efficient Indian agent, utterly disorganized and thrown back a term of years in their march onward because this agent is turned out to make room for some hungry henchman of a powerful local politician.

Slowly, but surely, progress is made. The classified service is gradually increased ; and though the increase is much too gradual still it is an increase. A constantly growing portion of the public service is thus taken away from under the reign of the spoils system. So it is in reference to political assessments. Formerly the people in office were taxed openly to provide big funds for the party in power. This species of blackmail still exists to a certain extent, but under the law much of it, probably most of it, has been stopped. During the last presidential election for the first time the Commission actively interfered to prevent the collection of these assessments, and was largely successful in its interference.

It is to just such audiences as that reached by THE CHAUTAUQUAN that we most desire to present the facts for we need their active help in presenting the subject to the minds of the people at large. If only the decent workaday American people could understand the full iniquity of the spoils system and its supreme folly, and could be made to see that the application of the merit system means not only the betterment of our public service, but especially the betterment of the conditions of public life, the complete overthrow of the spoils system could not be delayed a year. I trust sincerely that every reader of THE CHAUTAUQUAN will do what he can to bring this about ; and for this end nothing is more necessary than an intelligent and comprehensive understanding of the conditions of our public life. Especially should we give full support to those of our public servants who stand manfully against the doctrine that "to the victors belong the spoils," and, on the other hand, criticise and attack in every possible way those who, whether openly or secretly, act as supporters of this pernicious system of public corruption.