

POLITICAL ASSESSMENTS *

WHERE a bad custom has been in existence for any length of time, most people grow to regard it as part of the order of nature. This is well illustrated in the attitude of the average politician toward civil-service reform. He finds some difficulty in understanding the proposition that minor offices should be taken out of politics, and is quite unable to surrender the idea that a large part of the funds for every campaign should be paid by the office-holders.

Formerly, in every campaign, national, State, or local, the office-holders were assessed all round, as a matter of course. The party committees, after consultations with the heads of departments, notified office-holders outright what amount—usually about two per cent of their salary—they would be expected to pay; and at the appointed day they marched up, paid, and got their receipts. The scandal grew so intolerable that efforts were made to stop it by legislation. In some States, notably New York, these efforts have not accomplished very much as yet; the State and municipal officers are entirely under the control of the politicians of the party in power in the State, and are assessed at every campaign. But we now have a sweeping Federal law forbidding the collection of these assessments among national office-holders. Under this law the evil has been greatly diminished; yet it still exists to some extent, and it is most rife in presidential years. In off years the

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different campaign committees try, of course, to get money, and do a little assessing of employees on the sly, if they get an opportunity; but in presidential years the pressure for funds is very great. The national and State campaign committees strive urgently to get every dollar possible, and the political excitement rises to such a pitch of fever-heat that the politicians desirous of evading or breaking the law act much more openly than at other times, both because they themselves are so excited that they forget their caution, and because they believe that the public itself is too inflamed to take note of anything that is not fairly forced on its attention. In consequence, it is well, at the beginning of a presidential contest, to show clearly how matters actually stand; and it is also well, as publicly as possible, to warn politicians not to transgress the law, and to inform office-holders of their rights and immunities.

The law provides, under heavy penalties, first, that no office-holder shall in any way solicit or receive assessments or contributions for political purposes from any other office-holder; second, that no person, office-holder or otherwise, shall solicit such contribution in any Federal building; third, that no office-holder shall be in any way jeopardized in his position for contributing or refusing to contribute, as he sees fit; and fourth, that no office-holder shall give any money to another office-holder for the promotion of any political object whatever. The law, it will be seen, thus tries to provide both for the protection of the office-holder and for the punishing of the politician who solicits from him. The object of protecting the office-holder himself may be said to have been very nearly attained, at least so far as the office-holders who have any pluck and backbone are concerned. Cases in which it is alleged that the

office-holder has been in any way interfered with for refusing to contribute are very rare indeed. It may safely be asserted that if any man has the manliness to stand up and refuse to be bullied into paying an assessment he will not suffer. Moreover, the Civil Service Commission would be very zealous in dealing with cases of alleged intimidation by superior officers. If, during the approaching presidential campaign, we are able to establish any connection at all between a man's refusal to contribute and a discrimination against him by his official superiors, we shall certainly promptly and publicly recommend the dismissal and prosecution of these superiors. We cordially invite any complaint that may be made by any office-holder who is aggrieved in this fashion. Often the office-holder does not make the complaint because he fears that he will be further maltreated if he does. In such cases, we will, upon request, treat the man's complaint as confidential, and endeavor to make an investigation and get at the facts without implicating him, or at least without having him known as the author of the investigation. If in any office we found that several men who had not contributed were discriminated against by the head of the office, we should undoubtedly hold the latter responsible, and require him to show ample cause why he should not be considered to have made this discrimination because of his subordinates' failure to contribute.

The law thus works satisfactorily in protecting employees. It works much less satisfactorily, however, in punishing would-be wrong-doers. It is difficult to get evidence against these wrong-doers; and having gotten the evidence, it is sometimes difficult to get convictions. During the past three years the commission has recommended the indictment of some thirty different indi-

viduals for violations of the law against making political assessments. Indictments have been procured in ten or twelve cases. It is simply a question of time when we shall get some conspicuous offender convicted, and either heavily fined or imprisoned. Whenever we can make a strong case against any individual collecting political assessments, we intend to ask for his indictment, and we shall often get it, and this alone will serve to frighten other offenders. Of the men thus indicted, eventually we shall be able to convict a certain proportion. Moreover, we find that a very great deal can be done to stop the assessments by mere publicity. Throughout the approaching campaign we intend, whenever we find an individual or an organization trying to assess government office-holders, publicly, through the press, to call the attention of everybody to what is being done, and to invite any information which will enable us to prosecute the offenders; at the same time assuring the people solicited that they need not contribute one dollar unless they wish, and that they will be amply protected if they refuse to contribute at all.

Nowadays the effort to collect these contributions is usually made after a careful study of the law, and with a deliberate purpose to evade its provisions. Office-holders do not serve on the collecting committees, and the latter mail their requests to the clerks' homes instead of to their offices. But the truth of it is that the clerks ought not to be addressed by these committees at all. The law ought to prohibit its being done. The clerk is bound to feel that there is some duress in the matter, when a committee of the association with which his immediate superior is closely connected requests him for campaign funds. He ought to be allowed to contrib-

ute or not, just as he sees fit. It is all wrong for the Republican National Committee, or the Democratic State Committee of New York, for instance, to send circulars to the Federal employees in the New York post-office and custom-house, or to the municipal employees in the municipal departments, as the case may be. There is no more reason why letter-carriers, custom-house clerks, and city officials should receive these letters than there is why the employees of Lord & Taylor or of Tiffany should receive them.

Even when the committee thus evades the law instead of violating it, it is the intention of the commission publicly to call attention to the fact, and explain with the utmost explicitness, both to the public and to the government employees, that the latter need not pay a cent. I think that any campaign committee trying to solicit government employees in this manner will damage the good name of the party on whose behalf it acts to an extent that will far outweigh the benefit accruing from what paltry sums it may collect. Moreover, wherever we have reason to think that the law is being violated, even when there are no positive charges brought to us, we shall at once proceed to make an investigation, and will try to inspect any office in which we think foul work is going on.

There is another point to which I would like to call the attention of all possible wrong-doers. There are many men whose tongues are tied by fear of consequences to themselves, but who lose this apprehension as soon as the election is over. It is very possible that acts of wrong-doing in the way of collecting political assessments will remain unnoticed until after the election; but then some of the clerks will be very apt to talk about it. When an election results in the defeat of the

party in power, this is almost sure to be the case. Under these circumstances the clerks who have been assessed talk freely, and are delighted to try to avenge themselves by calling the attention of the incoming party to the misdeeds of the representatives of the outgoing party; and of course the wrong-doers can expect no mercy from their political opponents. So I would like to warn all these wrong-doers, who think they may possibly cover their tracks for the present, that they are probably merely preparing for themselves a ripe harvest of discomfort in the future.

Government employees, as a whole, are hard-working, not overpaid men, with families to support, and there is no meaner species of swindling than to blackmail them for the sake of a political organization. The contribution, moreover, is extorted from them at a time when it is often peculiarly difficult for them to pay. To take away two per cent of a man's salary just at the beginning of winter may mean that he will have to go without a winter overcoat, or his wife and children without the warm clothing which is almost a necessity.

Moreover, it is the poorest and most helpless class who are most apt to be coerced into paying. In several investigations undertaken by the commission we found that it was women who were most certain to pay, and that the women opposed in political faith to the Administration were even more apt to pay than the others. Indeed, this is the case among men, too. There are a certain number of offices in which the employees not in sympathy with the Administration for the time being always feel more or less fear of being turned out. They know they have no supporters among the politicians who for the moment are in prominent positions, and they are nervously anxious not to awaken any hostility

or give any offense. In consequence they are easily bled.

Another thing always to be kept in mind, in dealing with these cases of political blackmail, is that really but a comparatively small portion of the funds obtained goes to the benefit of the party organization. A certain proportion gets lost in the transit, and when the collecting officers or clubs are of low character this proportion becomes very large indeed. The money that is collected is used, in the great majority of cases, not to further the welfare of the party as a whole, but to further the designs of certain individuals in it, who are quite as willing to use the funds they have obtained against their factional foes in their own organization as against the common party foe without.

There is no longer any such brutal and flagrant assessing of government employees in the Federal service as was customary ten years ago. There is not nearly so much as there is in the local, State, and municipal service of New York, for instance; but a certain amount of soliciting for money, usually by indirect methods, goes on, and a good deal of the money collected is in reality obtained by coercion. More of this kind of work is done in a presidential year than in any other. A great deal of it was done in the last presidential campaign, in 1888. It is too much to expect that the commission will be able to put a complete stop to it now; but at least we intend to try to minimize the evils complained of, and to make them less than they have ever been before; to interfere as much as possible with the politicians who try to collect the funds, and to protect the office-holders whom these same politicians in any way menace or coerce.