

THE MERIT SYSTEM VERSUS THE PATRONAGE SYSTEM.

THE TWO SYSTEMS DEFINED.



IN American politics there obtain at the present moment two systems in accordance with which appointments to minor governmental positions are made—the spoils or patronage system, and the merit or reformed system. The underlying principle of the former is that set forth in the pithy and now famous sentence of one of its founders, “To the victors belong the spoils.” It treats all offices as fit objects wherewith to reward partisan service, as prizes to be scrambled for by the smirched victors in a contemptible struggle for political plunder, as bribes to be parceled out among the most active and influential henchmen of the various party leaders. The upholders of the merit system, on the other hand, maintain that offices should be held for the benefit of the whole public, and not for the benefit of that particular section of the public which enters into politics as a lucrative, though rather dirty, game; they believe that the multitude of small government positions, of which the duties are wholly unconnected with political questions, should be filled by candidates selected, not for political reasons, but solely with reference to their special fitness for the duty they seek to perform; and, furthermore, they believe that the truly American and democratic way of filling these offices is by an open and manly rivalry, into which every American citizen has a right to enter, without any more regard being paid to his political than to his religious creed, and without being required to render degrading service to any party boss, or do aught save show by common-sense, practical tests that he is the man best fitted to perform the particular service needed.

This is a perfectly fair and moderate statement of the two contrasted systems; and when the question is thus resolved into its simplest terms it is, of course, impossible for any honest and intelligent citizen to hesitate in his choice. Unfortunately, however, it is almost impossible to get the average voter to realize that the above really is a true statement of the question, when stripped of verbiage, and put in the language of naked truth. He is apt to be misled by the unceasing clamor of the interested advocates of the old spoils system; and their name is legion, for they include every

place-mongering big politician and every place-hunting small politician in the land, not to speak of the malodorous tribe of political hangers-on, who are too lazy to do honest work, and who know very well that if tried by the standard of merit alone they would no longer have the faintest chance of getting easy jobs at the public expense. These people are naturally ferocious foes of a reform which would deprive them of their exceedingly noxious influence in public affairs; and in their opposition they receive powerful aid from the cynicism of many intelligent men, who do not believe it possible to better political conditions; from the puzzle-headed inability of many honest, but prejudiced and narrow-minded, people to understand what the question really is, and from the good-nature, the indifference, the selfishness, the timidity, and the conservatism of that large number of citizens who never bestir themselves to do away with any evil that is not brought sharply home to their pockets.

One great trouble is that, thanks to having lived under the spoils system for sixty years, a great many people have come to accept it as being inevitably incident to our system of politics; and they grumble at it only as they grumble at droughts or freshets. Besides, they know there are in every party plenty of men competent to fill the offices; and they vaguely believe that it is merely a question as to which set of competent men is chosen. But this is not the case at all. If a party victory meant that all offices already filled by the most competent members of the defeated party were to be thereafter filled by the most competent members of the victorious party, the system would still be absurd, but it would not be particularly baneful. In reality, however, this is not what the system of partisan appointments means at all. Wherever it is adopted it is inevitable that the degree of party service, or more often of service to some particular leader, and not merit, shall ultimately determine the appointment, even as among the different party candidates themselves. Once admit that it is proper to turn out an efficient Republican clerk in order to replace him by an efficient Democratic clerk, or *vice versa*, and the inevitable next step is to consider solely Republicanism or Democracy, and not efficiency, in making the appointment; while the equally inevitable third step is to consider only that peculiar species of Republicanism or Democracy which is implied in adroit and unscrupu-

lous service rendered to the most influential local boss. Of course, both boss and henchman are often — perhaps generally — very good fellows, anxious to make good records and serve the public well; but it is at least safe to say that this is not necessarily the case.

The evil of the spoils system consists much less in the monopolizing of the offices by one party than in the monopolizing of the offices by the politicians at the expense of the people. Yet we have become so wedded to the vicious theory of party appointments that many men in public life are not even able to understand what is really the evil of which we complain; and hence some sapient gentlemen have recently been advocating a plan to divide all the offices among the adherents of both parties, by distributing them among the congressmen.

It may be mentioned, parenthetically, that the object and scope of the law is not yet clearly comprehended by the mass of citizens. Public confidence is a plant of slow growth, and public knowledge grows but little faster; so it is not surprising that after a sixty years' carnival of patronage politics, the average man has grown to regard it as part of the order of nature that only the adherents of the party in power need apply for offices. It is often a real labor to get men, opposed in political faith to an Administration, to come forward and be examined even for positions in offices where the civil service law is observed in the strictest and most non-partisan spirit. Yet a steady improvement is taking place in this respect. A constantly increasing proportion of the adherents of one party are coming into office while the other is in power. Most important of all, the applicants are growing more and more to realize that the change is real, and not nominal, and that their appointment and retention depend on their own good qualities, and not on political favoritism.

ATTEMPTS TO THWART THE REFORM.

Of course all the politicians to whom politics is merely a trade and means of livelihood do everything in their power to hinder the growth of this feeling, to thwart the progress of the reform, to obstruct and hamper the execution of the law, and to cripple the Civil Service Commission and the other administrative bodies by which the law is executed. Their great aim is to make the law inoperative and bring it into contempt. By loudly proclaiming that it is not going to be really observed, they often succeed in frightening away applicants for office who do not belong to their own party; and they then, of course, turn around and rail at the law, because of a partial failure for which they themselves are almost solely responsible.

Were it not for their industrious mendacity, there would be no difficulty in showing all applicants that they stand equal chances for appointment under the law without regard to politics. It is especially unfortunate where one of these men is himself appointed to some position where he has to administer the law he has derided. He can be held to a tolerably strict observance thereof, and invariably acknowledges its efficacy by shrieking that it ties his hands and prevents his appointing the "best men" (*i. e.*, his own political heelers); but, for all this, his character and utterances are sure to prevent men from applying for positions under him unless they feel they have some backing besides their own merit. Moreover appointees of this type often maladminister the law; and every such case of maladministration is made the pretext for a cry, not that the law be more strictly enforced, but that it be repealed, which would be about as sensible as to repeal the law against murder because some individual murderer has been improperly acquitted.

Much more serious harm than frightening off worthy applicants results from the unscrupulous representations of the patronage advocates. By incessant repetition of their falsehoods, they often persuade honest and worthy people that they contain at least an element of truth. All opposition to the merit system would cease to-morrow, save in hopelessly backward localities, were it possible to make people understand exactly what are its ends, and the methods by which these ends are sought to be attained. It is only comparatively rarely that men are to be found with ideals so low that they are willing frankly to announce that they believe in treating the offices simply as so much plunder. Even then they never tell the whole truth, which is not merely that they wish the victors to have the spoils, but, what is even more important, that they wish them to go only to the baser among the victors — for these are inevitably the beneficiaries of the spoils system.

Usually they insist that they themselves believe in "genuine civil service reform," but of a different kind from the one which all intelligent reformers are pressing, and which they proceed to try to prove to be a sham; and the very men who are blindest to the vicious faults of the patronage system manifest the greatest horror over the slightest shortcomings of its successor. They are the first to show capacious distrust of the sincerity of the men who are striving to better our governmental methods. Yet they evince the most touching confidence in the inherent nobility and strength of human nature when we point out that, without some help from the law, the best and purest statesman cannot grapple with the evils of the

patronage system. The moment we deal with the merit system they insist upon comparing it with an ideal standard, but clamorously defend the abuses of patronage by reminding us that this is a workaday, practical world, and that we must face things as they are.

APPOINTMENTS UNDER THE OLD SYSTEM.

A favorite mental attitude of these men is the assumption that at present the government officials appoint their own subordinates, and that to take this power away from them does away with the responsibility of the heads of the various offices. This argument is so absurdly false that no one who has ever been in active politics can listen to it without smiling. In plain truth, the very essence of the patronage system, as now developed, is that executive officers do *not* appoint their own subordinates; on the contrary, these are appointed for them by the congressmen and influential local politicians. It is quite impossible for the head of a great department, or of a large post-office or custom-house, himself to select his hundreds of subordinates. Either they have to be chosen for him by some test of special fitness applied to all who choose to come forward, as under the merit system, or else he must rely on the recommendations of other men; and under the patronage system these men are of course politicians, each of whom gets as many appointments as his local "influence" entitles him to. No man who is himself in public life will deny that this is the case. In fact it is accepted as a matter of course.

The different big politicians, the senators, the congressmen, and the astute leaders who do not take office, divide up among themselves the different appointments which are nominally made by the heads of bureaus. The nominal appointing officers have more or less to say about it according to their own political standing and strength of character; but the real officers are the outsiders—who, by the way, generally get into a battle royal over the division of the spoil. It thus results that the choice of subordinates falls, not on the executive officer under whom they are to work, but on the legislator, who was, or ought to have been, chosen because of his views on the tariff, or the silver question, or internal improvements, or a national election law, and without any reference to his fitness for selecting clerks and letter-carriers. Merely to state the facts is enough to show the inherent viciousness and absurdity of the system. Each congressman has very naturally grown to regard all the

appointments in his district as rightfully his to make; and then he himself proceeds further to parcel them out to satisfy the politicians back of him. In many offices, under the old method, the different appointments were regularly credited in the books or on the backs of the papers to the politician for whom they were made; I could mention two or three where I happen personally to know that this was the practice. Even where this detail was omitted, the fact remained that the outside politicians made the appointments. Thus formerly the railway mail service was regularly parceled out, each congressman getting a definite number of postal-clerks; whereas now any sharp, capable young fellow may come forward and be appointed on the sole condition of proving by fair, business-like tests that he is better fitted than his competitors to fill the position he seeks. If the present superintendent of the railway mail service were to retain his position under successive administrations of varying political creed, the sole condition of his retention being his efficiency in the management of his business, and no politician being allowed to say anything whatever about his subordinates, it would be perfectly safe to leave the appointment of the latter solely in his own hands. But, as a matter of fact, his retention in office four years hence depends not in the least upon his record as a faithful public servant, but upon the success or failure of his party in the presidential election; and under the old system the right to appoint his subordinates was always claimed by, and allowed to, the congressman and influential local politicians. It was therefore an immense step in advance when the appointments to the railway mail service were taken away from the politicians altogether and were made to depend solely on the success of the candidates in honest, common-sense, competitive examinations.

Be it remembered that the blame attaches to the system which permits and encourages congressional interference, and not to the congressmen who are obliged to act under it. Where it has come to be an understood thing that the congressman is the appointing power he has often no choice but to make the appointments; if, as is very likely, he is a pretty good fellow, he will make good appointments; but at any rate make them he must. For a single congressman to refuse to say anything about appointments, while leaving the system unchanged, would accomplish absolutely nothing.¹ He should do all he can to abolish the system; but as long as it exists all he can do

¹ While on this point I wish to express my emphatic dissent from the position taken by some good friends of the reform who seem to me to do positive harm by attacking all public men alike. In fact they prefer to

assail, not the spoilsmen, but stanch friends of the reform who under present circumstances cannot—and ought not to be expected to—come up to the highest theoretic standard. We must stand by the best men

is to make the best of it and see that only good appointments are made; and this is the course followed by a very large number of congressmen. To illustrate what I mean I will take an instance from my own experience. The first year I was in the legislature there was a great deal of work being done on the Capitol buildings. Stone-cutters were in especial demand, and they were regularly parceled out among the different State senators and assemblymen, each of the latter having a certain number of appointments to which, by a custom that was then quite as binding as law, he was entitled. Sometimes good and sometimes bad stone-cutters were appointed under this method, and the whole business was to me so intensely distasteful that at first I refused to have anything to do with it. The consequence was merely what, with a little more experience, I might have foreseen. The appointments that should have come to me were given to a couple of neighboring assemblymen, and the stone-cutters from my district — very decent, honest men — were left out entirely, and felt correspondingly aggrieved. When I realized how things stood I promptly asserted my rights, claimed the appointments for my district, and gave them out to my district stone-cutters according to an improvised merit test of my own. I then proceeded to take the only practical way of bettering matters; that is, I worked hard, and in the end successfully, for the establishment of a system under which *none* of the assemblymen had any say whatever in the appointments. In my own case I did not need to pay any heed to the political advantages or disadvantages of the patronage; but this is an element of the problem which cannot be ignored. I feel sure that the possession of the patronage damages rather than benefits a party; but it is certainly also true that for one party to refrain from all use of patronage, while not by law enacting that its opponent must likewise refrain, would work little lasting benefit to the public service, and would probably insure party defeat. It is precisely as in boxing. In college we used to be very fond of sparring; and of course the rules expressly excluded hitting below the belt, and foul blows generally. These rules made the sport fair and manly; otherwise it would have been brutal. But if there had been no such rules it would have been silly, and would have accomplished no good purpose, for a man to spar at all, if he did not himself hit below the belt while allowing his antagonist to do so. A

change in the rules, prohibiting foul hitting on either side, would have been the only way to work improvement.

It is therefore perfectly plain that the remedy lies in changing the system. For honest politicians to refrain from meddling with patronage, while leaving dishonest politicians full liberty to do so, is in the long run to work harm rather than good. The offices must be taken out of reach of all politicians, good or bad, by some permanent system of law.

IMPROVEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE.

THE civil service law accomplishes this end wherever it applies and is enforced; and in consequence the government employees protected by it, over 28,000 in all, — nearly a fourth of the total number in the service of the United States, — are now withdrawn from the degrading influences of the spoils system; and, as a direct result, in these offices the public business is performed more honestly and efficiently than ever before, while the offices themselves no longer form part of the vast bribery fund which is what the official patronage has become. The adherents of the old system naturally detest the new one, because of the good which it has done; and when, for very shame, they dare not openly defend the abuses by which they and their kind profit, they strive to do it indirectly by attacking the proposed remedy. They admit that the patronage system is evil; but try to delay real reform by proposing some foolish measure that would accomplish nothing but harm, or else confine themselves to clamorous misrepresentations of the purpose and scope of the only genuine measure of relief that has yet been proposed. A sample of the former method is the advocacy of the plan already spoken of to divide the offices among the congressmen, giving to each the appointment of all the government employees in his district. This proposal has recently had some vogue even among men of fair experience in public life, albeit that among its other defects it happens to be unconstitutional. Even if the last objection did not apply, the adoption of the plan would of course mean nothing but the revival of the old spoils system with an added touch of chaos. Its advocates evidently have some puzzle-headed idea that what is needed is not to take the offices out of politics, but to divide them permanently between the politicians of the two parties, instead of giving them all to each party in turn.

who are actually able to do good service in public life under its present conditions. Undoubtedly good men in public life should be freely criticized whenever they do wrong; but all should be judged by one standard in making comparisons. It is folly to strengthen our foes

by assailing our friends; and indiscriminate and unintelligent blame is quite as harmful as indiscriminate and unintelligent praise. We do not, as a people, suffer from the lack of criticism, but we do suffer from the lack of impartial and intelligent criticism.

THE MERIT SYSTEM THOROUGHLY AMERICAN.

As a rule, however, the opponents of the reform neither argue intelligently against it nor propose any substitute, but confine themselves strictly to simple misrepresentation and abuse. It is, of course, the kind of measure which especially arouses the ire of the cheaper variety of demagogue—the man who naturally opposes any measure to promote honest and decent government. Such a one has not morality enough to be ashamed of avowing that he wishes to pay off his private political debts by bribes, at the public expense, in the shape of offices, and is both too coarse-minded and too dull-witted to feel the scorn with which he and his antics are regarded by all upright and honorable thinking men. No argument is too flimsy or too contemptible for him to try. He takes great delight in calling the merit system “Chinese,” apparently because one of its adjuncts is the competitive examination, while in China there has long existed a clumsy and overgrown system of such examinations. As well might he inveigh against our alphabet because the Chinese have long had a cumbersome alphabet of their own, or against the use of gunpowder because it was first used in China, or decline to carry a Winchester rifle because jingals have long been known in the East. Again, he rails at the system as “English,” and as tending to produce an “office-holding aristocracy.” Of course he does not believe these arguments; he can’t, and retain his sanity. While England was a purely aristocratic community the spoils system flourished there far more rankly than ever it did here; and it is only since England has begun to take giant strides towards democracy that she has introduced the merit system, which the founders of our own Republic regarded as the only one worthy of a free and high-minded nation. A system which opens the public service to all men, of whatever rank in life, who prove themselves most worthy to enter it, and which retains them in office only so long as they serve the public with honesty, efficiency, and courtesy, is in its very essence democratic; whereas, on the contrary, the spoils system—which still obtains in most European kingdoms, and reaches its fullest development under the despotic government of Russia—is essentially undemocratic, in that it treats the public service not as the property of the whole people, to be administered solely in their interest, but as a bribery chest for the benefit of a few powerful individuals, or groups of individuals, who use it purely in the spirit of personal or political favoritism. It is among the most potent of the many forces which combine to produce the ward boss, the district heeler, the boodle alder-

man, and all their base and obscure kindred who in our great cities are ever striving to change the government from an honest democracy into a corrupt and ignorant oligarchy, wherein only the vile and the dishonest shall rule and hold office.

When a man is ashamed to use such merely demagogic arguments, he commonly, as a last resort, assails the methods by which it is attempted to put theory into practice, and especially the competitive examinations. Of course in introducing a radically new system there is bound to be friction. In extending the limits of the classified service inevitably from time to time mistakes are made, which the Commission strive forthwith to correct; and in preparing a multitude of examination papers they occasionally ask questions which it would be wise to leave unasked, or try to test a man’s capacity in some way which experience shows will not work satisfactorily. Any fault of this character should of course be pointed out and immediately remedied; but, equally of course, it furnishes no serious argument against the system. There are a very few more serious shortcomings; but it is noticeable that opponents hardly ever allude to these, or dwell on any point worth serious discussion. They prefer to make and repeat over and over and over again assertions which it is a euphemism merely to call misstatements. They have been refuted very often; they have been conclusively shown to be wholly and utterly false; but their sponsors stand up for them with such unabashed effrontery that it is necessary to keep on answering them.

One of these assertions is, that the examinations favor “boys fresh from school,” instead of men with experience of the world. This is simply untrue. The average age of successful candidates for the ordinary positions, such as those of clerk and letter-carrier, is about twenty-eight years. The boy fresh from school evidently stands less chance than the man who has left his school days at least ten years behind him.

THE QUESTIONS CANDIDATES ARE ASKED.

BUT the favorite assertion is, that “irrelevant” and “impractical” questions are asked. This again is simply false. The Commission strongly object to asking irrelevant questions. Surely no questions can be so irrelevant to a man’s duties as copyist or railway mail clerk as are questions about his political backing and about how he voted at the last election; and these are the very questions which those who thus prate about the examinations are themselves desirous of asking. As a matter of fact the questions are strictly pertinent to the positions for which the candidates are examined. The Commission has not yet tried to intro-

duce a merit test for laborers, although this must in the end be done (probably on the lines indicated by the Massachusetts State law, which provides for a system of registration of laborers). As yet, the great bulk of the examinations, probably ninety per cent., are held to fill positions as clerk, copyist, letter-carrier, and the like. In all these cases plain, common-sense questions are asked, such as appeal to the average intelligence as being suitable for testing the applicant's fitness for the special position he seeks to fill. A copyist or a clerk must be able to spell well and make grammatical sentences, he must write a good hand and be able to copy from a rough draft or from dictation, he must know how to do simple sums in arithmetic and have some acquaintance with the elements of bookkeeping, and he ought to be able to write an intelligent letter on some given subject; and therefore the questions test him on just such points, and, furthermore, require him to show a rudimentary acquaintance with United States history, government, and geography, as is befitting in one who seeks to serve Uncle Sam. A railway mail clerk is required to show a knowledge of the railway systems along the route where he is to serve, a tolerably intimate acquaintance with the geography of the United States, and skill in reading off a multitude of addresses on letters. A letter-carrier must be acquainted with the local geography of his city. If questions on subjects like these are not practical, then there are no practical questions in existence. As a matter of fact, the men who speak of the questions as impractical, or as referring to "the sciences," or the "geography of Asia and Africa," simply do not know what they are talking about; and their ignorance can hardly be called honest, for they have no business to speak on a subject about which

they could readily learn, but of which they are wholly ignorant. In dealing with these gentry I have now adopted the plan of using an argument sufficiently direct to appeal even to their intelligences. Whenever I meet a man who inveighs against the Commission for asking a letter-carrier "how far the earth is from Mars," or "to bound Timbuctoo,"—and I have heard men seriously assert that the Commission ask such questions,—I merely offer to bet him some moderate sum that he cannot produce a single instance where the Commission have actually asked such a candidate such a question; and he invariably refuses the bet, and on cross-examination admits that he does not personally know anything about the matter.

Finally, we who believe in the reform refer to that best of tests, experience, as demonstrating, beyond all question, that the merit system is not only practical, but produces the most admirable results. Wherever a public officer has taken office, believing in the law, or, even if not believing in it, willing to give it a fair and honest trial, it has invariably been found to work well. The public offices which have furnished the most conspicuous examples of honest and efficient administration of the public business have been precisely those in which the civil service law has been most rigidly and scrupulously obeyed. The post-offices at Boston, Brooklyn, New York, and Washington, under Messrs. Corse, Hendrix, Pearson, and Ross, may be instanced as showing one side of this picture, and those at Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis, under Messrs. Veazey, Paul, and Aquila Jones, as illustrating the other.

The merit system is the system of fair play, of common sense, and of common honesty; and therefore it is essentially American and essentially democratic.

Theodore Roosevelt.

TOPICS OF THE TIME.

Further Electoral Reform.

NOW that the adoption of the Australian secret-ballot system as the American system is practically assured within the near future, it is time to consider what further steps are necessary to complete the reform of our electoral laws which has been thus so worthily begun. The advocates of ballot reform have always recognized the fact that that was only the first step in a series, but they considered it wiser to attempt only one step at a time. When they had secured a secret, official ballot they were determined to bend their energies at once upon the logical follower of that reform, the limitation of campaign expenditures. It was necessary first to get the machinery of the elections and the printing and distributing of the ballots out of the hands of the political machines or organizations and into the hands of the sworn officials of

the State. This change would remove all excuse for assessments upon candidates for election expenses, and the secret ballot would abolish to a great extent the bribery of voters, by making it impossible for the briber to see whether the voter kept his bargain or not. When this had been done—that is, when corruption had been made both inexcusable and unprofitable—it would be comparatively easy to have it made illegal and to abolish it entirely.

This is the work which our reformers have in hand now, and they have in this, as they had in the secret-ballot movement, valuable experience by which to be guided. England has followed the same order as we are following. Her ballot act, closely modeled upon that of Australia, was adopted in 1872. Eleven years later Parliament passed the justly famous "Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act," which was a totally new departure in legislation, and under which bribery