

(March 29, 1909.)

The Canadian Civil Service.

BY PROFESSOR ADAM SHORTT.

PROFESSOR Adam Shortt, Chairman of the Civil Service Commission for Canada, addressed the Club on the subject of the "Canadian Civil Service."

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen of the Toronto Canadian Club: As the Chairman has said, I am here to-day to redeem a promise given to your President that I would make the first public declaration on the subject of civil service reform before the Toronto Canadian Club, a Club which has treated me very well in the past, and which I naturally regard as the premier Canadian Club of the Dominion.

The question may perhaps be introduced over the head of two or three most obvious statements, with the statement of two or three most obvious truths.

Everybody knows that Canada for the past decade has been making very rapid progress; has been, at least, expanding very rapidly. The forces of the country have, of course, had to expand with the development. The government has had to take charge of an expanding region of legislative and executive work, and the result of the legislative work has had to expand very rapidly the executive departments. The expansion of the country, as you all know, has been going forward by leaps and bounds, and millions of expenditure must be administered by the officials of the government.

The problem, therefore, of organization of the civil service of the country, the character and increase of the recruits, the nature of the work to be done, the developing responsibility of that work—all these points are matters which have been pressed upon both government and people within the past few years.

It is needless to say the responsibilities of the Ministers have been increasing. The pressure of work upon them has been increasing, and with the tremendous expenditures of recent years the opportunities for parasitic attachment have been much greater. The tendency to utilize patronage has increased, and where the Ministers are pressed with other work, no matter how anxious they may be (and they are not all equally

anxious) they find it impossible to look after all details; and scrutinize the character and ability of the parties appointed. Some investigations gave color to the idea that things were not going altogether in proper lines, and that the grafter was doing a certain amount of work; and when you consider the citadel to be defended and the plunder to be obtained you can understand that an organized body of people looking for something for themselves are difficult to hold off.

Great Britain had coped with these conditions in previous years. The United States have also coped with them, Great Britain leading the way, the other countries following. It became necessary for Canada to do something, and everything led to Canada doing something at the last session of the Dominion Parliament. The outcome is the Civil Service Act, an act, which when you compare this system with those of the United States, it must be confessed that it is a very admirable measure.

There are certain difficulties, certain points that will have to be remedied, but my experience in comparing and looking into other systems was that we had before us a bureaucratic system.

Much is left to depend upon the working out of that act. It is not very rigid act. In some clauses it looks rigid. A great deal of discretion is left with the individual departments and their heads, the deputy heads, the Governor-in-Council and the Commission. This factor is prominent in the whole system. There is a dual responsibility. Even where the discretionary power is left with the department, it is subject to the issue of a certificate by the commission approving of the action of the discretionary power. That is the general principle which is set forth in the 13th section of the act; that, "except as herein otherwise provided, appointment to positions in the inside service, below that of deputy head shall be by competitive examination, which shall be of such a character as to determine the qualifications," etc. Now that appears to give the impression that competitive examinations will furnish the normal method of selection from the lowest to the highest position in the inside service.

Parenthetically I might state that the service is divided into two sections—inside and outside. The inside service comprises the departments at Ottawa, the permanent officials of the two Houses of Parliament, the Auditor General's staff and the Governor-General's staff. The outside service, which

takes in the civil servants in the rest of the country includes, of course, as its largest feature the post offices and custom houses, naval and military inspection service, the railroads and canals service. It is provided in the act that any part or the whole of the outside service may be brought under the same conditions as the inside service by Order-in-Council, so that it is framed for to meet an expansion at the wisdom and discretion of the ministry of the day. I might say from the point of view of the commission that we consider it a very wise feature, because if the whole civil service had been put under the commission to start with, we would have been swamped.

The organization of the examinations and many other features in Ottawa have been more than enough to tax our energies up to the present and for sometime to come, and if the outside service had been added as well we should have had a good many failures to record, and that would not have been a very comforting thing to us at the start.

But as Sir Wilfrid Laurier has stated in Parliament, taking in the outside service will proceed gradually, until the whole is covered by the new system.

One of the greatest comforts to the commission and the country is that both government and opposition are staunchly in favor of the new system.

Now as to the working of the system: I have indicated that the general principle is that of promotion by competitive examination, but a competitive examination may be a very good thing or it may be a very barren thing. The difference between what might be called an effective competitive examination and one that is ineffective is a wide problem, and introduces the question of the stage at which the individual enters the service. It is necessary for me at this point to indicate the three divisions that have been made in the service.

The service has been divided into three classes, there being no normal system of passing from one to the other. The only normal way of getting from a lower to a higher class is by going up and taking the examination to get into the higher grade. The lowest grade comprises messengers, sorters and packers. The second of the three divisions consists of stenographers and ordinary routine clerks who have no personal responsibility. You will draw a distinction between those who look after the clerical work of the various departments under the direction of someone else. That is a section by itself. Then will come two other sections of each division that will

form a class by themselves. The entrance into the lower grade of the second division, because each division is subdivided into "A" and "B," that is, subdivision "B," will be by promoting the individual, who will be eligible for promotion right through to the top. No other general examination is required, and that is why that examination is a very important one. In the third division, or subdivision "A," these positions are filled by promotion from subdivision "B."

Now as to the messengers, sorters and packers class, if an individual enters as a messenger and wishes to get a clerkship, he has to go outside and take the general examination to become a clerk. All those who enter the third division, or routine clerkship division, cannot be promoted into some other division except by going out and taking the regular entrance examination. But it was felt that it would be a hardship on the competent people who had previously been appointed in the third division, and so a section has been introduced permitting in certain cases of exceptional merit that individuals can be promoted from the third division into subdivision "B" of the second division if they were in the service before the act came into force, but not otherwise.

Now you will gather from this that there is a good deal of discretionary power, because in all these matters the commission is the authority to issue a certificate with or without examination, as is determined by the regulations. These regulations I had expected would have been out before I appeared here, but they have not yet passed Council.

The chief difficulty comes in the first of the second divisions. The process of filling higher positions in the service hereafter will be by promotion from the lower divisions; so that a man entering subdivision "B" of the second division has the road open to him right through to deputy minister, but like the road open to every one to become President of the United States, they are not all going to arrive at the position of deputy head, and therefore the principle of selection in the promotion comes in.

Hitherto, as a matter of convenience rather than wisdom, promotion usually went by seniority, but now it is not he who has been longest in the service will have the right to go up next, but merit will be the price of promotion, so that an exceptionally clever clerk going into to subdivision "B" of the second division may go through to the first division and leave a great many others behind. That is only natural and

necessary, and it does not convey any slight or disparagement upon others, because you all know some men make most admirable lieutenants, but who are no good as generals. It is not a charity to them to place them in the position of leaders. They are excellent in carrying out general directions, but have no ability to work out things for themselves. But you will see in other cases the capacity of a man for initiative, for undertaking responsibility, for thinking things out, for leadership. Where that comes it should be encouraged and brought to the front. Unless it is encouraged and brought to the front your service will stagnate. The only salvation of the new system is that we shall be able to attract into the service as able, as capable, as brainy and as enterprising men as can be got by any commercial company in the country. (Applause.) There are no companies in the country which can give competent men a larger field than the government can.

The question of filling a certain position where a competent man is not at present or at any future time in the service, the government has the alternative, if it cannot find the man in the service, to go outside the service and take a man in. That anomaly is provided for under a general section which says that all positions under that of deputy head shall be filled by competitive examination. But it is quite obvious that an examination to fill a position as that of must be more than a mere academic examination. In many respects a purely academic examination is of little consequence. The party to be appointed to such a position must have had a certain amount of intellectual training, but the main qualification is in the experience acquired by that man in the line of work pertaining to the position to be filled. If there had been a competent man in the service his qualifications would have been good, and the only justification for going outside the service is that the outsider has had practical experience that will indicate his fitness to fill the position; consequently the examination will have to be of such a nature as to bring out the experience and qualifications he has acquired in the same line of work outside the service. The examination must not be merely nominal, but it must be of the same kind as is required of a man who is to be put into one of the higher positions of an insurance company, a bank or a university. It would be impossible for a university to set an examination for a new professor. They necessarily want to know what the man's academic career has been, but they also want to know what he has accomplished

between that time and the time of his being appointed to the professorial chair. So it is with the civil service, and therefore when you hear of an examination being held for certain positions, I do not want you to run away with the idea that they are purely academic. It was said in Parliament, and we hear it day in and day out, what is the use of a mere academic examination to fill these positions. Men may be able to take 90 or 100 per cent. on certain papers, but that does not prove their fitness. That, however, is not our conception of an examination. An examination is any adequate test as to the fitness of a man for the position, and that test can be made by the commission or the department or both. According to the letter of the law it may lie with commission, but we have taken the stand from the start that it should lie between the commission and the heads of the departments; that is when the position is of such a character as to require technical knowledge or experience, and in that case the head or deputy head of the department or head of a branch shall co-operate with the commission in determining the qualifications to be asked for in the advertisement. The candidate shall state his qualifications, and if necessary shall be submitted to a final test, because the Minister has to be satisfied and the commission has to be satisfied, the Minister making the selection and the commission issuing the certificate approving.

Now there comes in the big exception to the competitive system. Where the deputy head declares that the knowledge and ability requisite to fill a position are technical or otherwise peculiar, the appointment may be made without competitive examination and without reference to the age limit by Order-in-Council, provided, however, that the candidate receives a certificate from the commission to be given with or without examination that he is duly qualified. You will notice that the initiative rests with the deputy Minister. We have found that the terms "technical" and "provisional" are very wide, and we are liable to find that "otherwise peculiar" will cover a multitude of things (laughter), and there is where much of the difficulty is likely to creep in until the system is got down to what may be called a running basis, because precedents have yet to be established.

Now turning to the British system and American system we recognize the importance of these precedents, when certain positions come up which are required to be filled by a certain class of men. We will find a variety of opinion in the different departments. One department may be anxious to utilize

the competitive system wherever possible, and another department will not be so anxious to utilize it. So we are certain to be confronted by many propositions as to adequate qualifications of a man nominated by the department and requiring a certificate from the commission. Now let it be understood that the commission has nothing whatever to say about who shall be brought under this exceptional circumstance. If the department decided that a certain position is to be filled by that method then we are tied up to examining one man. Of course if we find that he does not come up to the standard, we turn him down and ask for another man, but at best we get simply a number of individuals to choose from. Now what is the point in such a method? It is this, there is a large region between the man who will do and the best man available. You can see that where a thoroughly good man is not available, you will have to take the best you have to choose from. You may feel confident that a much better man would have been obtained if the position were thrown open. There you are confronted with the difficulty that if a man is turned down (if he must be turned down) there is an opportunity for a good deal of friction.

Now let me say that although the conditions for making the exception are said to be technical, provisional and otherwise peculiar, it is very gratifying to find that the heads of the departments where the most technical work is required are the very men who are most anxious to use the competitive principle. And advertisement was issued the other day and an examination will take place to-morrow providing for purely technical positions. We have positions for compilers of information in the geological survey, we have positions for two draughtsmen in the geological survey who must be able to take the field notes sent in from all districts in Canada and work these up into maps. We have a position in the hydrographic survey. We have a position at the experimental farm. We have the position of purchasing agent in the Maritime Department (laughter), and we have also positions in the Canada Archives, which are most difficult to fill. It is encouraging to find that the quality of men applying for these positions is very high, that there is a real and effective competition, and we are likely to get exceedingly good men. There is this one difficulty, however, the age limit, which is 35. We are asked to cut out one or two men who have had better experience than those within the limit, and are well qualified to fill

the positions, but they are six months or a year or two over the age limit.

It is hopeful that there is no special reason for exempting the positions which are "provisional and otherwise peculiar." nevertheless there are positions which legitimately come under that head. We are at the stage of making precedents in these lines, and if we find we get perfectly satisfactory men and are plainly able to satisfy the departments, we are likely to have fewer personal nominees.

We have arranged a system which has been approved by most departments and may be approved by all that offer positions for men over 35 years of age. Under this particular section we may advertise and ask for applications, and the Minister may select his man from the list with the sanction of the government.

Now as to the attitude of the members of Parliament. There is a variety of opinions. Some feel it is a hardship that their patronage should be cut off, while others are exceedingly thankful that it is cut off (laughter). They can now say to an applicant, "I am most anxious to do anything for you, but you know it is taken out of our hands. There is the commission; go to them and you will get all that is coming to you." (Laughter.)

Some people have the idea that the patronage which was lost by the members, comes to the commission, and we have streams of people coming up to us to know if we have not something we can give them. We have not a single ounce of patronage. We have simply to declare certain conditions, and the whole thing rests with the applicant. You are the parties who get yourselves appointed. If you take a high position on the list you are sure of an appointment." A good many people are now on the civil service list who never passed the examination, many of whom have been in the department 15 or 20 years. These were taken in temporarily under the old system and have been retained from time to time up to the present.

In the matter of promotions, every man promoted must get a certificate from the commission, and this is where our great unpopularity will be. Every man is sure to think he is the party who is entitled to go up. He tells that to his chief or deputy, who should turn him down. But he thinks it better to listen to him, and finally says, "yes, no doubt you are a very good man and a very able man. We would like to promote

you, but we cannot; there is the commission." (Laughter.) They are the parties who have to pass on all promotions. We will submit your name to them and see what it looks like." So the onus comes on us. Because every man who is refused promotion will feel that he has a grievance against the commission. This man and all that we may have to deal with will make the egregious unpopularity of the commission. But we will bear up as best we can, and we are looking to the country for support in that respect.

My closing word is that this departure which has been made is not the last, but only the first step in our system (applause). If the country loses interest in the situation it will be impossible for the commission and the ministers to bear up against the pressure. But if the country has a lively interest in maintaining the civil service on a high level, we shall be continuously supported, and, I hope, criticised when necessary. We look for competent criticism. I am not here to say that we will not make mistakes, because we would be omniscient if we did not make mistakes. Many will see that we have not chosen the best man for this position or that. So we welcome the criticism, because it will strengthen our hands, improve our position and help us to look out for the future. If we make proper decisions, let us have your approval and support.

Last of all, I want to urge upon the young men and the people of this country that there is now opening a new profession in this country. To the professions of law, medicine and the church and certain scientific followings, for which our educational institutions have been built, and in which young men are being trained, is now added a profession for which we hope young men will train in all seriousness, and when they pass from the universities and other schools of training that they will take these positions which the government offers and become in time bulwarks of this country. If the British service has been able to do that, and if that service is a model for all Anglo-Saxon people, then a great deal has been accomplished. Go back half a century and you will find their position was no better than ours, rather it was not nearly as good. They had a rooted and grounded patronage, which does not exist in Canada. If they have been able to bring that about, the same is possible for us in Canada who are without equal in civil service in any part of the world, the same is possible for us in Canada, and upon their character will depend the future of the country.