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Civil Service Reform

Address delivered by R. S. White, President of the Civil Service Federation of Canada, at the banquet tendered by Professor Shortt and Colonel LaRochelle to the delegates to the National Assembly of Civil Service Commissioners of the United States, at the Chateau Laurier, Ottawa, June 15, 1916.

Ladies and Gentlemen,—

We have in Canada in respect of the Civil Service a wholesome rule that civil servants must leave their party politics behind them when they enter the Service. If I should venture a criticism of the Governments of Canada during the past forty or fifty years, I could do so with perfect safety because both political parties in Canada are pledged to the hilt by word of mouth to Civil Service reform. But I sometimes fear that their attitude is like that of the Maine statesman who was unalterably in favour of the state prohibitory law, but against its enforcement. It has been treated by the various Governments down to a comparatively recent period as an academic question, a sort of pleasant theory to spin before the electors during a campaign as, for instance, in a constituency not a thousand miles moved from Ottawa, and to be pigeon-holed when the election was over. Something, of course, has been done. Within my time two Commissions have been appointed by the Government, not to administer a reformed Civil Service law, but to inquire into the constitution of the Service, and ascertain how best it might be improved. But so far as any practical results are concerned, they are yet to be realized. The situation reminds me of the poem of Southey's of the Battle of Blenheim, in which he introduces old Kaspar and little Peterkin. Peterkin says: "And what good came of it at last?" quoth little Peterkin. "Oh, that I cannot tell," said he, "but 'twas"—not a famous victory, but apparently a convenient way of getting rid of a more or less troublesome question.

Some years ago the Civil Service Federation of Canada was formed, with the view not of bringing pressure upon the Government of the day but of making representations to the Government of the day as to the necessity of effecting reforms in the Service by the introduction of competitive examinations for entrance and the merit system for promotion within the Service. Deputations waiting upon Ministers have always—like all other deputations—received a most courteous and kindly reception, and have been told, in the words so familiar to Canadian ears, the matter would receive serious consideration. I have heard of a foreigner living in New York who during a financial crisis there went to the bank to draw out his money. He was told that he could not have his money just then, but could have an order for it which would be exchanged for cash later on. He was asked if he quite understood and he said: "Oh, yes, I understand; if my baby wakes up at night and cries for milk, I give him a milk ticket." Unfortunately, in respect of the Outside Service we have had a good many milk tickets passed on to us, but we still await their redemption. Disraeli, in writing to a friend on the