

# The Civil Service and Politics

An Address by Professor Adam Shortt, M.A., before the Winnipeg Canadian Club

Professor Adam Shortt, a member of the Canadian Civil Service Commission addressed the Winnipeg Canadian Club on Jan. 25 last on the subject, "Taking the Civil Service out of Politics." The following are some of the most important passages from the address.

The civil service, of course, is a matter with which you are all acquainted, but the question is, what do we mean by politics? Politics in that connection, means a certain thing for British people. It means, under the British system, the party system of government. Now, many distinguished people, distinguished Canadians among others—the late Goldwin Smith was one of the most prominent—condemn the party system in politics. I am here not to condemn it. On the contrary, ever since I have had an opportunity of looking into the workings of the British system, I find the party system of government is absolutely inevitable, is the only reasonable and workable system in connection with British institutions.

It is not, therefore, in condemnation of the party system that I am here, because I absolutely believe in the party system, but because there are certain evils connected with it, in its operation, which ought to be and can be remedied and which prevent the party system from fulfilling its proper functions in connection with the government of a country.

Well, you have this party organization. As soon as a party acquires control of the majority, under the British system it enters on the responsibility of conducting the legislative operations.

From the largest and best point of view it is recruited and maintains that policy for the general benefit of the country and for the carrying on of its government, which commends itself to the good sense of the majority of the people. But that is not the whole of it. There are a great many people who are influenced by, say, things other than good sense and what is for the general benefit. Many of these people are to be excused, because they don't know what is for the general benefit. They have no definite ideas on many of the problems presented to them for their consideration and vote. It is all the same whether it is this, that, or the other. They have not had the time, education, experience or opportunity to look into them, and, therefore, one is as good as another. All cows are black in the general darkness.

## Basis of the Patronage System

These people then have votes and their votes must be captured, otherwise the party representing the best interests of the country is going out of power. Therefore some other way of influencing these people must be found and therein is the basis of the whole patronage system. You can appeal to the pockets of these people, individually or in groups. There are two general ways of doing that, either through personal appointments of themselves or their friends to government positions, or through the getting of a share in the government expenditure, which comes in various ways.

These are the two broad sides of party patronage, successful party patronage. Now, it is the object under the unrestricted operation of party machinery, it is the object of the government party, and the opposition, to make bids for the votes of these people, to promise all sorts of things in opposition and, as far as possible, deliver all sorts of things in power. But, of course, the opposition has immensely the advantage in promising, because the period of delivery is indefinitely postponed and all sorts of things may happen between the promise and the delivery. But the party in power has either got the things to deliver or has not got them at all. Therefore it has to make the most of what it has and make it go round as far as possible. The consequence is a tendency, an inevitable tendency to load up. If you have salaried positions the tendency is to make as many positions as possible and not to make the salaries too high, because the higher the salary the more violent the pressure, and the larger the number anxious to get in. The smaller the salaries and the more

salaries the more people you can take care of. What is the consequence? I am afraid in practice it ends in demoralizing the service.

## Discourages Efficiency

The government doesn't get the work done by the best kind of people. It gets too many on the salary list, and breeds even in the best minds the idea, the tendency to say, "Well, hang it, what is the use? Here's a chap next door to me apparently doing nothing. He gets his salary alright. Why should I hustle?" It puts a premium on indifference and doesn't put any premium, or very little, on efficiency. It is the horror of the man responsible in the higher grade for getting work done, who has to get it done or go out, because, of course, there is an immense amount of government work that has to be done, and if that man, who has his heart in his work, is delivered all kinds of incompetent instruments to do it with, see the position he is in. That

interesting, immensely interesting. I would delight in dealing with them, but I don't like the process of getting in. I don't like what has to be done in the wards in the capturing of the vote, promises which have to be made, work which has to be done in getting people to vote who have no interest or don't know what their interest is."

It is a long and tedious process to explain to these people what is the best interest, and it is a short and effective process to offer them five dollars. So the politicians take a short method to efficiency instead of a long and round about, slow process, with which, of course, no one has any patience. The premium is therefore, put all on the side of lowering the standard of purity, of obscuring issues, of not getting the matter properly presented to the electorate, of avoiding educating the electorate and of bribing people instead.

Now that being so we have a basis and starting point for civil service reform.

below their standard? It is the system. It is the improvement they wrought there, because the old system had become intolerable, and because men, recognizing it, set themselves to improve the situation.

And they are got improved easily. It was a long, hard fight. It was predicted right and left that it would be utterly impossible, that it wasn't politics at all and wouldn't work and all that sort of thing. Now it is universally accepted in Britain and so universally practised that they never seem to have had anything else.

## Reform in the United States

Turn to the States. They adopted reforms at a later time. There, you know, they had the system of "to the victors belong the spoils," a principle introduced, curiously enough, by the fathers of their confederation on the principle that people should not have a vested interest in the affairs of public offices.

Nevertheless after careful study of the British system, various presidents of the United States, one after the other, introduced gradually the newer system, until now it extends almost universally through the nation in the central government and has worked an immense reform in that government. There are still weaknesses, but the improvement has been so enormous that the suggestion to go back to the old system would be scouted absolutely in both countries. Now, there is a movement in the United States to extend these reforms to the state governments, to municipalities and to all kinds of organizations and there is a regular wave of civil service reform passing over the United States in every department of its work.

## And in Canada

Now, looking at it then from that point of view, we see the advantage at any rate of taking the civil service out of politics; the next point is, how does it work in operation and how can it be done? This is what might be called the constructive feature. Well, without going into the question of why the act under which our commission operates was introduced, I may simply say that there came a crisis in Canadian history when it was found advisable to adopt a reform, beginning at least with the inside service, but rendering it possible of extension to the outside service.

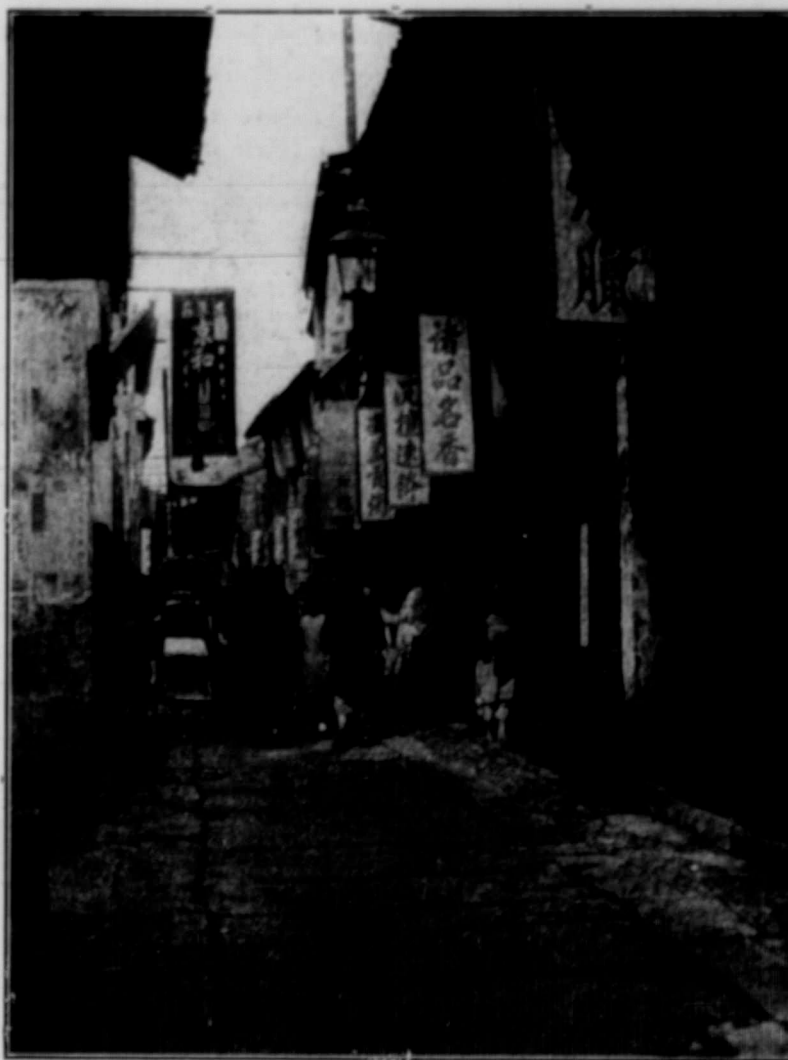
Consequently the civil service act of 1908 was passed. It is not a very ideal measure in some of its details, because it was advisedly rushed through the House in order to demonstrate to the public, or incidentally so, that the revelations in connection with the fisheries department or some of these things, didn't contaminate the whole service. And there were people in connection with the legislature or parliament who were anxious to see things put on a better basis. The act came into operation just before the election of 1908. The government saw fit to ask me, together with my colleague Mr. La Rochelle, of Montreal, to come up to Ottawa and take charge of the matter.

The act provides for covering all the clerical departments in the inside service, that is the service of the departments at Ottawa, not as yet the post-offices, customs houses, various land offices and all sorts of things up and down the country, nor, of course, the customs house and post office in Ottawa. But the act does provide that by order-in-council any or all the parts of the outside service may be brought under the same conditions as the inside service. And therefore it is at the discretion of the government to extend the operation of the act to the service at large either all at once or gradually.

## Favors Extension

And I say that preferably we should like to see it extended gradually, because it would involve a great deal of work and of course, some mistakes and trouble. If we had to tackle business all up and down the country it would be easier work to take certain sections first, find out by experience how it will work, find out what is necessary in the way

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THE AWAKENING OF CHINA  
A typical scene in the less congested portion of the native city of Shanghai

man is the bulwark of civil service reform, even if he got his position by the same old method.

Now that is a sort of natural history of the situation. There is nothing abnormal in it. There is great necessity in it. You can easily see that one party cannot drop that system and let the other go on with it. The government cannot say, "We will not hand out anything" and let the opposition go on promising all sorts of things. Consequently we have to deal with the matter honestly and straightly. It is no use condemning the government for the system. It is no use condemning an opposition tempted in that way.

Again, see how it affects getting into parliament. Time and again people on both sides of politics and on neither side—we've heard it over and over again—have said to me, "I should like to be in the House. The problems before the government and the parliament are very

We look at a country like Britain and people say, "Well, there, of course, under the British system, they avoid that sort of corruption. But, then you know, the British system is superior to ours. They have a better class of people, a people more accustomed to looking at things from a larger point of view," and so on. That is not true at all.

If you go into any political history you will find that men like Pitt, Fox, Sheridan and Chatham and all those people who were the idols, and in many ways justly so, of our admiration, were steeped in the most bare-faced forms of corruption in the sense of paying for votes and expending public money in contracts and all that sort of thing, where there was an immense rake-off and the contractors were expected to contribute to party funds. It is not the superiority of the British people. We are British people ourselves. The Americans are nine tenths of them of British stock. Why should we be