

THE CIVILIAN

VOL. II.

SEPTEMBER 10th, 1909

No. 10

The Civil Service and the Canadian Public

The civil service feels it has a just grievance in the apathy, not to say the indifference, of the Canadian public. Newspapers seldom or never talk of it; when they do, nine times out of ten it is to make silly jokes about sinecures. To appreciate its work, to understand its problem, they do little or nothing, beyond an occasional generalization. Even in Ottawa, where over four million dollars received annually in salaries are spent by civil servants, and where one would think mere business enterprise would come into play,—if there is an editor with a constructive idea concerning the service (which we doubt) he has adopted the oyster for his model in eloquence.

Yet Canadians are somewhat given to pride themselves on their institutions. Especially are they fond of inviting comparisons with the United States. The United States is popularly supposed to be very low indeed (to speak mildly) in the standards it has set for the public service. It was the inventor of the "spoils" system. That settles it—for all time to come. Yet the truth is that for thirty years past the United States has led Canada,—in so far as public opinion is concerned—in the effort to apply intelligence to the problem of the public service—if "led" be the word when the second party has not started in the race at all. There is a Civil Service Reform League in the United States—a most active and influential organization, to whose proceedings THE CIVILIAN has more than once referred. On another

page of this issue may be read also what a second great engine of public opinion, namely, the National Civic Federation, is doing to raise the character of the civil service of the United States. More and more the mystery deepens how with a public so soundly asleep as that of Canada on all such questions, the Act of 1908 was ever possible. Governments do not usually so far outrun their constituency.

What is the explanation? No doubt there is one. The country is young and small, of course, but if anything the service bulks relatively larger in Canada than in the United States. That, however, it is no part of the service's business to find out. The service is taking a more practical line. If the mountain will not come to Mahomet, then Mahomet must go to the mountain. It may be the public's workshop and business, but it is the service which has to do the work. And so, whether on the broad question of reform (the field in the United States of the Reform League) or on the narrower matter of the sanitation of public buildings (where, in the United States, the Civic Federation has assumed the task) it is the civil service and not the public, or any portion of it in Canada, which is doing the caring and the thinking and the acting. Of course this is all topsyturvy. Logically, the affair lies in the first instance between the government and the people. Yet who knows? It may be as well for the souls of civil servants as it is. It should certainly tend to make the service livelier.