

MERCHANTS AND POLITICS.

SEVERAL of the daily and weekly newspapers have lately criticized the Dominion Government for its large expenditures. Some of the critics are not politically opposed to the present Ministry and cannot easily be accused of political animus in making these attacks. THE REVIEW is not concerned to defend the Government, nor to censure it, in this matter. Our own conviction is that the electors, as a body, get what they vote for, nothing more, nothing less. A merchant who supports the present Government may say, "Why should I vote against my party and put in another set of men just as extravagant and more corrupt, men whom the country has tried and found wanting." We cannot answer this. It sounds very reasonable and may be a correct reply to criticisms of the Laurier Government.

It is not our place, as a business paper, to take sides on this question and to defend the Ministers, though it seems only fair to point out that Canadians, as a rule, are not economically inclined individually, but spend a good deal in personal expenses which could be saved. How, then, can we fairly blame a Government for extravagance when we are often extravagant ourselves? The question is of vital importance to merchants, because a business, where there is no waste and which is not deprived unnecessarily of capital drawn out to pay the living expenses of the owners, is likely to flourish in the hardest times. We have never yet heard from one of our merchants who regretted economical living and saving during a prosperous season.

For this reason a Government should be encouraged in economy, although we are by no means sure that a Ministry which kept expenditures within revenue would always meet with success at the polls. The business men of the country have the first interest in seeing that the national finances are in sound and healthy condition. As long, however, as they remain rabid party men, on either side, they practically reduce their hold on a Government to a minimum. The politicians care very little for the straight party man. They know they have him anyway, and when the election comes round he will be found in the ranks as usual—pliable and obedient. This blind allegiance to party is what entrenches a Ministry in office for long terms. The late Government at Ottawa was in power for 18 years—too long—and some of its members began to think they had a sort of hereditary right to rule. The same thing is liable to occur with any set of men who have their own way for a long period and get to believe that the country owes them a living. They appoint their friends and relatives to office by the score and wonder why the electors grumble. These appointments to office do not fall much to the lot of merchants, yet there are many positions which could better be filled by business men than any other class. The duties in the Customs service, for instance, could be discharged more efficiently by merchants—that is, men who have bought and sold over the counter—than by persons who have had previously no commercial training. Yet, who get the best posts in the public service? Doctors, lawyers, editors, heelers, platform spouters and men who go into politics for what they can get out of it. Merchants as a class are not office-seekers and no one can bring that charge against us. No self-respecting merchant cares to go round wire-pulling and begging for favors, and we are

not urging that offices be passed round to content us as a class. But what we do complain of is that positions requiring business experience are not filled by persons with that qualification. To test the justice of this criticism look round your own county and see who is sheriff? Who is collector of Customs? Who is registrar? Who is inspector of this, that and the other thing? We venture to say that the result will surprise you when you have gone over the list.

If appointments to public office are to be made primarily on the ground of party service, that, of course, alters the case. Then we are no better than the United States were a few years ago when political influence settled the fate of each candidate for public office. But as we, in Canada, are usually bragging of the superiority of our system to that of the United States, is it not time we enquired whether we are really better governed than they are instead of being gulled year after year by hollow professions?

The present is a convenient time for merchants to consider where they stand politically. No election is at hand, and there is ample leisure to weigh the whole subject carefully and impartially. But someone may say: Why do you introduce political ideas into business when there are so many issues of moment which have no relation at all to politics? Well, we have come to the conclusion, that in almost every important, commercial matter: the tariff, insolvency legislation, national finance, the banking system, railway rates, etc., the party system is interfering with the best results, and as the condition of trade and the methods of trading in this country all depend upon the right solution of commercial problems it is time to speak out without fear or favor.

SMALL PORTS OF ENTRY.

The larger importers have a standing complaint against small ports of entry. In the great cities uniform rates are usually enforced, and as the big importing firms are situated at those points, they have hitherto been the strongest protesters against inequalities which are suspected to exist.

But, as a matter of fact, the wholesaler has no more grievance in this matter than the small retail importer. The latter has rights, too, and they should be given attention. There should, in fact, be one law for all, and the importing retailer is just as likely to be injured by Customs rules, misapplied or misunderstood, as any larger house. Unless goods are similarly classified and the same duties paid at one port as another, there is no guarantee that any merchant is getting identical treatment as his neighbor. Mr. A., a merchant at one place, may be paying 30 per cent. on a line of goods imported, which Mr. B., a merchant in a town twenty miles off, is getting in at 25 per cent. This is not fair.

Fortunately, the Minister of Customs is a thoroughly practical business man, and we have yet to hear of a single case where Mr. Paterson has turned a deaf ear to a genuine cry for reform. The head of the Customs Department is not, thank goodness, a lawyer, a doctor, or a professional politician who sticks a pen behind his ear and looks wise when a deputation of business men appear with a complaint. We have no doubt of his desire to deal justly and fairly with commercial questions, and the necessity of uniform rates of duty, the advisability of the collector at each port being kept well informed, must be very apparent to him.