WHAT THEY SAID IN COMMONS DURING PATRONAGE DEBATE

Sir George Foster Defends Firms Making Classifications—Mr. Fielding Favors Partial Return to Patronage—Hon. Mr. Doherty Thinks Situation Will Gradually Right Itself.

(Continued from yesterday.)

Right Hon. Sir George E. Foster: This subject, which has been debated this afternoon, mostly on general principles, will no doubt come before the House in its details before this session is very many weeks older. Therefore, I am not going to go extensively into the matter now.

In the first place, I desire to correct a wrong impression which is prevalent throughout the Civil Service, throughout the city of Ottawa and, I think, probably in this Chamber, as to the work which has been performed by the Civil Service Commission, by the first employee of the Civil Service Commission, Arthur Young and Company, and by the employees, of the sub-committee of the Privy Council, Griffenhagen and Associates.

In the first place Arthur Young and Company had nothing to do with putting civil servants out of office, or putting people into office as civil servants; not one single iota of influence or sight of action had they the power to exercise in that respect. Arthur Young and Company—regardless of whether it was a good thing to take that company or another—were employed by the Civil Service Commission to do what? To classify the positions in the Civil Service. The Civil Service Commission themselves made the placements and the replacements, the retirements and the appointments, and Arthur Young and Company had nothing, good, bad or indifferent to do in connection therewith. The classification that they did was the classification of positions—ascertaining the qualifications for, and the scope of work of certain positions—and their experience enabled them to give valuable advice in that respect. They were asked to do it, paid to do it, they did it, and the positions were classified, in the main, according to their recommendations, modified by conferences between them and the Civil Service Commission. Once the positions were classified it became the duty, the sole duty, of the Civil Service Commission, by whatever tests they might use, to fill positions and to make retirements.

Hon. W. S. Fielding: So far as the Government have honestly endeavored to abolish patronage, my sympathies have been with them. I raise no objection to it from the point of view of those who desire to exercise patronage. But my complaint is that the Government have not abolished patronage, although they have professed to do so. The Government of which I was a member introduced an effective Civil Service reform when they appointed a Civil Service Commission to deal with the Inside Service at Ottawa. I do not mean to say that the system then adopted was such a vast improvement in every department; even the old system of patronage, if you call it so, was capable, under wise administration, of giving to the people in general honest and faithful service. I shall speak for my own department, because it is the one of which I have the best knowledge. When I retired from that department, I believe I left, in the public service, a body of men, many of them appointed by me, many of them by my predecessors, as well qualified to administer the public service as any men that could be obtained under any system of competitive examination. That is my conviction, and I know my successors in office have testified to the quality of the men they found there. Although I mention what is the case in my department, I have no doubt that the same thing will apply to other departments as well. The principle, however, of examination is a good one; you have to have it; it is not perfect, but I do not know that anything better can be offered. I confess that within my opportunities and observation, I should like to have a man come into my office and sit down and talk to me, so as to let me have some knowledge of what he knows, what he is capable of doing, his capacity, his temperament, all that enters into the best qualities of a man. I should like to have that opportunity if I could. In the absence however, of any better system, the system of examination seems to be the proper thing; at all events it gives you a test of a man's education and his qualifications from the educational point of view. Therefore, I agree with and support the principle of competitive examination as applied to the Inside Service at Ottawa. The Civil Service Commission was never intended to be a patronage distributing body; it was intended to conduct competitive examinations and to award prizes according to the marks achieved. That system could be followed out in the case of the Montreal customs house, the Montreal post office and such offices in St. John, Halifax, Toronto, Kingston and other of the larger cities. If the Government had gone that far, I think they would have made a further step in the right direction. They have gone a good deal further than that; and while I am not objecting to that, I do not think it is working out very well. When you undertake to appoint a petty officer of some sort—I am using the words of my right hon. friend (Sir George Foster) when he spoke of a petty officer up in the Yukon—say a minor postmaster in one of the towns away down in the far-off districts of New Brunswick, how is the Civil Service Commission going to appoint that man? What knowledge can they get about him? There is no competitive examination. They put up a ticket stating that the office is vacant, and Tom, Dick and Harry put in their applications. How can the Civil Service Commission adopt any system that will enable them properly to judge of those men's qualifications? They have to refer to somebody. What I suppose they will do today is to refer to the post office inspector of New Brunswick, and he will go down into that district and make enquiries of somebody in the neighborhood. But he must be guarded; he must not, for his life, ask a member of Parliament, because the latter knows something about the matter. He has to ask somebody who knows nothing about it. The system is very much like the system of examining men for a jury. You cross-examine men as to their knowledge of the case, and by the time you are through, you almost reach the conclusion that only imbeciles are qualified to be on a jury at all. That is pushing the thing to the extreme. The absence of patronage does not worry me. When the Government went beyond where they could use the competitive examination, I think they went rather too far. Under the old system, if a vacancy occurred in a little post office in the constituency of one of my hon. friends opposite, he was notified and he selected some one on the advice of his friends and neighbors, and in nine cases out of ten the man whom he recommended was a decent, honest man. If he had not been so, he could not have been appointed. Under the new system, there is so much red tape that it takes months to fill a vacancy, and that in itself is an argument against the system.

Rt. Hon. C. J. Doherty

In so far as the principle embodied in the Civil Service legislation is concerned, for my part it commended itself to my judgment when that legislation was adopted. It commends itself to my judgment still. I do think that there are evils attached to purely political patronage against which the law should provide some system of check, and that, as I understand it, was the principle which underlay the Civil Service legislation as we have it at the present time. The principle is absolutely sound, in my judgment, but it is well to remember that when you come to put principles into practical application, however good those principles may be you must at the same time have the application of sound, common sense. There was once a very great artist who was asked what he mixed his colors with to produce such beautiful resuks, and his answer was: "With brains, Sir." Now, when you come to apply any principle you must exercise sense. We have had three years of experience in the working of this particular Civil Service legislation, and I see in that experience no reason to depart from the principle that underlies it, although I think that in the carrying out of the Act certain things may have developed that make it proper for us all to consider whether in the practical application of the principle there is not room for improvement, and whether you would not, perhaps, obtain better results, from the point of view of efficiency in the public service as well as from the standpoint of economy—which, after all, is the objective of those who are held responsible for the working of the system,—if certain of the provisions of the Act were modified. The hon. member for Maisonnuve (Mr. Lemieux) has indicated a line of consideration, and hon. member for Shelburne and Queen's (Mr. Fielding) quite agrees, I understand, with the view implied therein, that is, as to whether the application of the principle indiscriminately to all classes of public servants is wise in the interests of the efficiency of the public service. Just to take one class that occurs to my mind at the moment. I am not expressing any final conclusion as to what ought to be done, but I think it is fair for us to put before the House things that present themselves to our minds as indicating a possible necessity for modification in the law as it stands. Let us take one class—a numerous one—those men who have to be employed a purely manual labor. Now, there is a case where certainly you cannot apply any system of competitive examination, and it seems to be a question that calls for serious consideration whether it might not be advisable to withdraw that class of people from the operation of the provisions of the present Civil Service Act. Reference has been made to rural postmasters. Possibly, it might be to the advantage of the public service that they should be withdrawn from the control of the Act; and in the very carrying out of the Act itself it would seem to me, while adhering to its principle, while seeing to it that proper precautions are taken against abuses of political patronage, that at all events, we should consider the wisdom of making such provision for the exercise of direction on the part of those who are ultimately responsible to the public as would create some corresponding relation between that responsibility—which, under our system of government, both governments and members of Parliament cannot avoid—and some measure of opportunity for being heard in connection with those things for which they are held responsible.

We have heard a good deal this afternoon on the merits of this suggestion. None of us can have his eyes closed to the situation created by the Act, and it is not impossible that, in the first fervour of the desire for absolute reform, some things may have been overlooked that should have been taken cognizance of, and perhaps the pendulum was allowed to swing too far in one direction. These are things that call for consideration. They have been receiving the attention of the Government, and with the additional light which has been thrown on the subject this afternoon, it is the purpose of the Government further to consider the question as to what modification, if any, might in the public interest be made in the present law, and more particularly in the present system of its application. And in view of this declaration which I am now making, I understand—and this, I believe, was anticipated—that the hon. gentleman who made the motion, is prepared to withdraw it.

Mr. J. H. Edwards

It is not my intention to discuss this resolution at any great length. I have spoken on this matter before, and I am perfectly consistent tonight when I express my opposition to the appointment to offices in this country being left in the hands of the Civil Service Commission. I am saying now something that I have not said before in this House.

Mr. Lemieux: You mean the Inside Service too?

Mr. Edwards: Well, I am more concerned, naturally, about the Outside Service, but I would go beyond that and say I think a mistake was made in handing over the making of appointments for both the Inside and the Outside Service to a Civil Service Commission. Mr. Speaker, it is impossible for any three men occupying offices in Ottawa, I care not how capable they are, to make appointments to positions in all parts of this great country, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. They cannot do it; the thing is not only impracticable, but impossible. They must seek advice from some source or from some person, whether the appointment is in British Columbia or in Nova Scotia—and I mention the extreme West and the extreme East in order to emphasize the impossibility of any three men in Ottawa carrying on that work. Under the present system these three gentlemen—and I say nothing whatever against them or their capabilities—are responsible for the selection of persons to fill positions in all parts of the country. But if a man is to be appointed in British Columbia or in Kingston, they cannot run out to British Columbia or to Kingston and investigate the matter personally; they must apply to some person in British Columbia or in Kingston on whom they can rely. The ridiculous and illogical feature of it is that they must not under any circumstances seek the advice of the member for the constituency, although the efficiency or inefficiency of the service depends upon whether or not the appointment is a good one—and the member for the constituency is the man who is held responsible for the proper carrying on of the work. The whole thing seems to me to be absolutely illogical.

(Continued Monday.)

Mexico Intends To Be Her Own Boss

Notifies U. S. That Agreement Made by Pesqueria is Not Acceptable to Her.

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Mexico City, March 18.—General Obregon has informally advised the American government that not even to obtain recognition from the United States will he enter into a treaty into the United States embodying the agreements reached by the state department with Roberto V. Pesqueria. The underlying principle in the agreement, which Obregon endorsed as a candidate for president was that Article 27 of the Mexican constitution "is not and must not be interpreted as retroactive or violative of valid property rights."

Such action on the part of the Mexican government can but mean that recognition of the Mexican republic by this government is farther off than ever. Albert P. Fall, secretary of the interior, when still senator, said that he felt satisfied that the Harding administration, would follow out the Mexican policy of the previous administration as set forth in the Colby-Pasqueira correspondence. Mr. Fall now is admittedly the adviser of the present administration on Mexican affairs.

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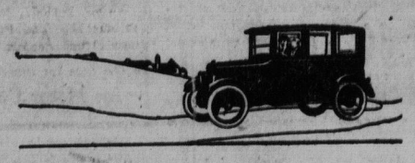

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