

that they would test this question. Judging from the character of some of the men whom Mr. Mowat has appointed to the position of returning officers, any honest man would shrink from going through an election if such men were to be returning officers. We know that men who have been appointed sheriffs have been disrobed for improper conduct by the Judges of the Court. They may be perfectly honest, but if they were dishonest in the administration of funds placed in their hands, it is not likely they would be honest if they could serve their masters who gave them a living. I know that in the town where I live the license commissioner, to whom an hon. member has already referred, is known and has been proved to have accepted bribes from different tavern-keepers before he would grant a license; yet when this fact was published, and the Ontario Government knew it as well as the people of Belleville, he was reappointed to the position he had disgraced. The friends of the Ontario Government were so disgusted with this reappointment that they induced his colleagues not to meet at the board with him; and the Mowat Government was again compelled to relieve him of the responsibility, and to prevent him blackmailing persons who desired to obtain licenses. We know that the fact is patent in every constituency, that unless the keepers of licensed houses voted in a certain manner they would not obtain licenses; that men who had been keeping respectable houses, against which no complaint had been made, from ten years to a quarter of a century, were deprived of their licenses because they were Conservatives and could not be convinced into taking political action against their party. If no difficulty has arisen of appointing returning officers in counties in which there were not sufficient sheriffs or registrars, we have as good a right to believe that the men appointed shall be responsible to the Government, will be just as honest in the administration of their office of returning officer, and more so than men who are not responsible to the Government practically, if opposed to them, but rather would be inclined to serve the cause of a Local Government by placing difficulties in the way of any candidate he desired to defeat. I have no fear of any of the results to which hon. gentlemen have referred arising from the appointment of returning officers, nor do I believe the Government will pass over the heads of appointees of the Ontario Government. But where returning officers have been known to act partially it is well that the Government of the day, whether Conservative or Reform, should have power to teach those men that they should not commit acts of that kind in future.

Mr. BLAKE. The hon. Minister of Customs seems to have more to do with the elections than the hon. First Minister, and is in antagonism with the hon. First Minister with respect to this matter. The former hon. gentleman declares that appointees will not be passed over, while the latter thinks that such persons holding office under a Local Government should not be appointed returning officers. It is difficult to know what is the principle which is about to regulate Executive action. We have heard a good deal of the misdeeds of returning officers, but such as have been stated on this side of the House are cases which have been before Parliament or a judicial body, while the cases brought forward by hon. gentlemen opposite have not received any sifting or investigation. The Reform party, for a long time, advocated this proposition. They advocated it a long time ago, when the great bulk of the officers was under the control of the Government of Ontario, holding views different from our own. They were unsuccessful in securing its adoption, because the Government insisted on keeping the power in their own hands. When they came into power it was the rule that registrars or sheriffs should be returning officers, but such officers were equal to the occasion. It was with reference to such a Government, animated by such a sentiment, having appointed these officers and having

Mr. BOWELL.

control of them, that my hon. friend, in furtherance of the general principle to which I have referred, deliberately proposed to Parliament to tie his hands and the hands of any future Government by providing that these officers should be appointed from amongst those ranks. Hon. gentlemen did not oppose it then; they did not object to it then; they thought it was all right, they thought it would help them; but no sooner than they get into power they change their minds. It was a good thing to tie our hands, but a bad thing to tie theirs, and they want to free themselves from the tie the House imposed. My hon. friend tied his own hands, because it was well that all Governments should have their hands tied in this regard, and that we should accept the proposition that the general standing of these officers, the responsibility they were under to the community in which they lived, was a better guarantee, on the whole, for our having good, honest and impartial returning officers, than to place the appointment in the uncontrolled hands and at the uncontrolled disposal of the Government of the day, who would thus be allowed full license to name whom they pleased for the purpose of discharging the duty of deciding whether they or their adversaries were the elected representatives of the people. I admit that there may be cases where the sheriff or the registrar is not the best man. I admit that there are bad sheriffs and bad registrars; but the question is, whether it would not be vastly better, even with these few exceptional cases, to entrust these particular duties to such men than to place their appointment at the uncontrolled discretion of the Government of the day to appoint its own creatures. I think that on the whole you are sure to get as a general rule respectable men for returning officers under the present plan, but you are proposing to substitute the control to the Government of the day in a matter of which the Government of the day is not indifferent, in which it has an interest, in which it is one of the parties and in which their wish will be that a returning officer may be favorable to their own side. The Minister of Customs says he could not understand my hon. friend's argument; but it was perfectly plain. The returning officer in that county wanted to have partizan returning officers, but he did not want to lose any votes in Bothwell, so he took men from another county who had not votes there and put them in as returning officers. He had his creatures there to do his bidding and yet he lost no votes, and he appointed poll clerks, supporters of my hon. friend who were under the control of the deputy returning officers sworn to do their duty, and they did it and they were deprived of their votes.

Mr. BOWELL. They need not have taken the office unless they liked.

Mr. BLAKE. No, of course, they need not, had they cared to forfeit £10 each as that is the fine for refusal. I know a case in which a most active supporter of mine in one of the townships I was contesting was chosen the day before polling. He was the gentleman upon whom I mainly depended for organization in that particular township, and the £10 had to be paid in order to release him. In other words, he was fined £10 because he was an active supporter of mine.

Mr. BOWELL. I had a case in which they served the papers after 12 o'clock in order to compel him to serve the next morning.

Mr. BLAKE. Certainly; abuses have occurred and they do occur. I do not suppose that abuses will be altogether avoided under the law as it now stands. I do not say that the sheriffs and registrars are in every case the pick and lead of the community, but on the whole you have better securities by this plan than by a plan by which you make a party to the contest judge of who shall decide between the parties as returning officer. One word with regard to