

## OPEN LETTERS.

### The Common Sense of Civil Service Reform.

A LETTER FROM COMMISSIONER ROOSEVELT.

IT is always a surprise to me that the Congressmen from the outlying districts fail to understand the immense advantage their constituents receive from the civil-service law. Under the old spoils system the people who are nearest the centers of influence are sure to have the best chance to get appointments. The man who can get to Washington readily and badger his Congressman, or badger the head of a department, has opportunities which are not open to the man who lives in northern Michigan or in Louisiana or on the Pacific coast. Under the civil-service law, on the contrary, each State gets its proper quota of appointments. Thus, during the four years of President Harrison's administration, the Commission succeeded, for the first time, in getting the quotas of the Southern States level with the quotas of the Northern. Four or five hundred appointments in the departmental service at Washington during Harrison's administration were made from the Southern States, and at least two thirds of the men thus appointed were white Democrats. The majority of the remainder were colored Republicans. The law thus worked well in two ways. In the first place, the young white Democrats who thus got in were appointed purely because of their merit, without the exercise of any political influence. They were given the chance to earn their livelihood and serve the Government solely by the civil-service law; and not one of them would have been appointed save for this law; and but for its existence the appointments would not have been evenly distributed among the States. No section of the country has benefited more by this law than the South.

In the next place, the colored people appointed were

not men of the ordinary colored politician stamp, with which we are unhappily familiar. They were bright, educated young fellows, often graduates of the colored colleges, of the class whose members have very few avenues of employment open to them, and who most need to have these avenues made more numerous. The civil-service law has thrown open one more walk of honorable employment to colored people who are striving to win their way upward.

I wish that the plain, sensible people of the country, those who are interested in decent politics, and not in office-mongering and office-jobbing, would make some of the Congressmen who declaim against the civil-service law understand that it is not safe always to pander to stupid or dishonest voters. The civil-service reform law is, in its essentials, a law to provide for entrance to and retention in office upon grounds of merit alone, and to do away with bribery by means of offices. In the last analysis, it is as immoral to bribe with an office as it is to bribe with money; and those Congressmen and politicians who want to repeal the civil-service law occupy a position quite as indefensible as if they wished to repeal the laws forbidding bribery at elections. They stand as the apostles of the dishonest in our public life.

The enactment of the civil-service law has brought a better class of clerks into the public service, and has enabled these employees to live more as reputable American citizens should live. They are enabled to provide for their wives and families, and to look to the future in a way that they could not possibly do so long as they were dependent for their livelihood upon doing the bidding of some local boss. Often clerks come to Washington not with the intention of staying permanently in the government service, but with the intention of putting

in their evening hours in studying some profession, which they would be unable to study in their country homes. Thoroughly capable men, while in the lower grades, can often do this without in any way interfering with their government work. I recall, for instance, a young fellow from Maine, wholly without political influence, who got an appointment under us in Washington. He stayed three years, rendering entirely satisfactory service to the Government, but during that time he also pursued his studies as a medical student, so that he was able to leave the government service, and complete his medical course abroad, and is now a practising physician. Another young man, whose case was brought to my notice, was from a country district in Texas. He was poor, the only son of a widow; he had educated himself at the local district school, and by studying at home during the evenings; he was ambitious, and wished to study law, but had no chance to study law where he was, and no chance to go anywhere else, because he had no money. He had no political or social influence whereby to secure an appointment on the grounds of patronage; but he entered one of our civil-service examinations, and, merely on his merits, won a position of a thousand dollars. On the lonely farm where he had been he could never have earned a third of this amount; neither could he have studied his profession at the little cross-roads village which was his post-office. Coming to Washington, he took night-courses in law, being also a faithful and efficient government clerk. He succeeded in being admitted to the bar, and after a few years he left the service, was taken into partnership, and is now a prosperous young lawyer in a thriving county-seat town. I am taking these instances almost at random; they could be paralleled in hundreds of cases.

Contrast the above with the experience of the man who gets his appointment under the spoils or patronage system. In the first place, he must sacrifice his self-respect by asking as a favor what under the civil-service law he gets as a right. He has to go through that most disagreeable experience of kicking his heels in the antechambers of the temporarily great. He has to sue for his appointment, intrigue for it, and usually has to do some kind of political work for local ward politicians as a price of their backing. Once in, he may or may not do his duty to the Government, but he is obliged all the time to be uneasily aware that he owes his retention to political influence, and that he must at all hazards retain this influence or be turned out.

The civil-service law does good service in raising the character of our government work; but the best service it renders is to our public life, for it wars against the foul system which treats government offices as forming a vast bribery chest with which to corrupt voters. It wars against a system to which more than to any other one thing we owe what is evil and undesirable in American political life.

*Theodore Roosevelt.*