

CHAPTER 3

THE PROMOTION BUGBEAR

PROMOTION is one of the bugbears of the Civil Service. The structure of the state apparatus is, as we have seen, based on a hierarchy, each class in which has its own more or less clearly defined function in the general scheme of organization and administration. There is no straight run-through and although in theory every clerical officer can secure promotion out of his class, in practice he must, as things stand and with certain exceptions, be content to live out his Service life within the class which his educational opportunities and the economic position of his parents have earmarked for him. But within the classes there are grades—a hierarchy within a hierarchy—and the prospect of promotion from grade to grade is just as “powerful an aid to discipline” as the prospect of pension after forty years’ service. For every carrot there are always hundreds of donkeys, each one striving to get his nose in front and to keep it there. No one can hope to get the British Civil Service into clear perspective unless he appreciates the extent to which its complex structure and its internal affairs are bound up with this infinity of gradings. This is not accidental or a phenomenon of purely Service significance, though admittedly it provides the most striking illustration of a class, and a class within a class society. It must be seen surely as a reflection or a special aspect of the general arrangements which govern that society and not something peculiar to the “bureaucracy”. To show however how deeply entrenched in the mind of the Treasury this idea of a multiplicity of grades has become, the Association of Officers of Taxes, as it then was, fought a long campaign in order to get two of the grades within the clerical class employed in income-tax offices merged into one. It gave evidence before the Royal Commission in 1929 drawn from the practical experience of its members, clearly showing that in the interests of departmental efficiency

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it was undesirable, and indeed impossible, to separate the work of the two grades. The Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue, at that time Sir Ernest Gowers, had other views. In his own evidence he stated "that so strongly was he in favour of the two tiers as an abstract *principle* [my italics] that he would only say that if he were forced to the conclusion that the two-tiered system could not be adapted to the work of tax offices, it would be to his great regret". There I suggest was a revelation of an attitude which, in essence, expresses a reluctance to put the efficient performance of the work of the state before the paramount need to preserve intact a structure which divides and subdivides the staff, and creates a competitive spirit largely unrelated to a desire to give of one's best in the public service.

So far as the civil servant himself is concerned, his attitude towards promotion is compounded of two things—one is status and the other financial reward. For the administrative official status bulks larger than the cash that accompanies it. The reason for that we shall discuss in another chapter. The "other ranks" in the Service are for obvious reasons more inclined to place the emphasis on hard cash, but even with them status has its importance. This is only another aspect of that vocational separatism which successive governments and the Treasury itself have done so much to foster. The impact of events, and particularly the war itself, are beginning to break this down; but traditions upon which the Service has been nourished for a hundred and fifty years quite naturally die hard.

A former Director of Establishments of the Inland Revenue, in a talk to Establishment Officers in 1942, produced three axioms for the guidance of his colleagues. The first was that civil servants were not there for promotion, but that promotion was there in order to ensure the well-being of the organization by providing civil servants of this or that kind and in such numbers as are required. The second was that the selection of people for promotion was properly determined by the good that their promotion would bring to the organization in which they served—which was only another way of saying the same

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thing; and the third that the governing authority must take entire responsibility for building human material into the fabric and should regard that as one of its most vital concerns.¹

These propositions quite naturally aroused a storm of controversy. They raised of course the whole question of seniority or merit as the guiding principles in the selection of officers for promotion to higher grades. They proceeded on the assumption that promotion was in no sense a reward for services rendered but a recognition rather that there were still more valuable services to come. They challenged the view that promotion was in effect a sort of remuneration, something to which the individual civil servant was entitled as by right and for which he would naturally qualify, subject to the maintenance of a given standard of work and conduct, in the normal course of events. But they overlooked the very fact to which throughout this book we are trying to draw attention—namely that the Civil Service does not operate *in vacuo* and that the Rotarian motto of "service, not self" represents a standard, possible of achievement only in the context of a system in which it will be possible to attach far more importance to the job and the doing of it than to the prestige, status, or even, beyond a certain point, the remuneration of the individual performing the job.

We shall see when we come to discuss plans for the post-war reconstruction of the Civil Service, now occupying much of the time of the Service unions, that state employees themselves are quite prepared under certain safeguards to endorse the principle of promotion solely by merit. Its full acceptance however, will depend upon the removal of the frustrations and futilities which in present circumstances cause promotion to be regarded as something very well worth while for its own sake.

All this was to some extent argued before the Tomlin Commission in 1929, when the representatives of the staff put forward the claim that "in view of the speculative nature of the reporting system, promotion should be by seniority subject to fitness". The Commission refused to accept that view and "deprecated the exercise of pressure designed to stress the

¹ W. V. Bradford, *Principles of Promotion*—a paper.

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claims of seniority as against exceptional merit." To express the point of difference in its simplest terms, it comes to this. Should an employee of the state receive promotion strictly in his turn, and subject only to a certificate of his fitness to do the work he will be required to perform in the grade to which he is promoted, or shall promotion rest on a basis of "let the best man win" irrespective of age or seniority? Now it would be immeasurably easier to solve that problem if the machinery for assessing the respective qualities of any given number of would-be promotees could be regarded as foolproof; but that is just what it is not. The essential feature of the promotion system in the Civil Service is the annual report. This is made upon a form, only to look at which is calculated to give any reporting officer a sick headache.

Upon it he is required to appraise annually the quality of every officer eligible for promotion, under the following headings:—manner and address; energy; courage; leadership; penetration; constructive power; judgment and common-sense; output; quality and, in the case of supervising officers, effectiveness of organization and method, and in respect of each one of these categories, he is to state whether the subject of the report is outstanding, very good, satisfactory, indifferent or poor. (There is no marking, be it observed, for N.B.G.) That one might regard as more than enough, but now, after taking on the job of a first-class psychiatrist, he must go on to a summing up of his conclusions in terms of the officers' qualifications for promotion. He will say in fact whether Mr. X is exceptionally well qualified, fully qualified, qualified, or not yet qualified to undertake the duties of the grade to which he may or, as is more likely, may not be promoted. It is only necessary to add that in one department alone there are something like 1,200 separate and distinct reporting officers and as many countersigning officers, each with his own standards, prejudices, foibles and the rest, for the difficulties inseparable from any promotion system to be appreciated. Can it be wondered that, with the scepticism bordering on cynicism to which these methods have given rise, a large part of the staff has tended to over-emphasize the

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virtues of seniority? It is just as natural that the other part containing within it the younger and more up-and-coming elements should prefer to risk the hazards of the present system on the off-chance of a win, if only by a short head, in the race for promotion. Meanwhile for the period of the war there has been an attempt at compromise between the two principles with results which have made promotion an even more speculative business than it was before. Not only that, but in accordance with a policy to which the staff representatives have been assenting partners, all wartime promotions are on an acting basis with no guarantee that the holder of the post will not revert to his former grade when the time for the inevitable stocktaking arrives.

Given the hierarchical character of the British Civil Service it can safely be asserted that there is no real solution of the promotion problem. The carrot system was devised only indirectly to improve the efficiency of the Service. Its main purpose is to provide a spur to energies which might otherwise flag and to keep the official nose to the departmental grindstone.

The solution will only come with the introduction of new incentives to individual effort and a reconstructed Civil Service, which, promotion apart, will provide ample scope and satisfactory conditions within the limits of a particular grade or class. Only then will it be possible to apply, without modification, the principle of promotion by reference to fitness, for here again we are confronted only with one facet of the general problem of "getting on in the world", the solution of which lies in the assumption of collective responsibilities for the achievement of individual benefits.