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To the

**CUSTOMS JOURNAL**

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**Our Case**

in

**PARLIAMENT**

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The House went into Committee of Supply on the Civil Service Estimates. Mr. Mr. J. W. Lowther, (Cumberland, Penrith) occupied the chair.

On the vote to complete the sum of £919,000 for the Customs Department,

Mr. Herbert Lewis complained of the system of political appointments to the Customs service. It was a thoroughly bad one, and a relic of the bad old times when political appointments permeated the whole Civil Service. In every other department save this such appointments had been abolished, and rightly so, and what reason could there be why a Customs boatman should be appointed on party recommendation? (Hear, hear) Such appointments should be made on grounds of efficiency alone, and removed absolutely from the control of Parliament. (Hear, hear.)

Major Evans Gordon asked the Secretary to the Treasury to grant a Departmental inquiry into the grievances of the Customs boatmen. They were miserably paid for the most important duties, their prospects of promotion were small, and a claim for the improvement of their condition should not be rejected on the general ground of economy. These so-called boatmen, acting for the Customs, examined the luggage of passengers from the Continent and, under supervision, worked for the several departments concerned with health regulations, Board of Trade rules, the Explosives Act, the Merchandise Marks Act, the importation of dogs, and other matters. In respect of pay, these men began at £55 per annum, rising by £1 10s. for five years to £2 10s., up to a maximum of £85. For five years, therefore, these Customs boatmen received a little over £1 per week, and after 15 years' service they obtained 32s. a week. No one could assert that this pay was sufficient for the duties they had to perform. Then these men were constantly employed on Sundays and received no pay for their work. Since 1895 the men in the junior ranks worked three out of four Sundays for nothing, and he contended that Sunday work should be paid for on the same scale as in other branches of the Civil Service. The prospect of promotion was also very poor, owing to the few appointments which were open to them. By not giving the men an adequate wage for their responsible duties they were exposed to serious temptation. He moved the reduction of the vote by £100.

Mr. Munro Gibson (Leith Burghs) said that the same complaint had been made in Scotland with reference to the Sunday labour by these men. He contended that they should either receive an allowance for Sunday work or the labour should be redistributed in such a way as to give the men their Sundays or an equivalent on some other day. This was, in his judgment, a real grievance suffered by the men.

Mr. W. W. Rutherford referred to the position of the preventive officers. He said that there were two sections of that service—a lower section, consisting of 321 men, and an upper section, consisting of 68 men. The men in the lower section received a salary of £95 per annum for the first two years, and this was then increased by £5 a year to £150. The duties of the officers were very important, and involved matters of great trust and confidence. The officers in the water guard service were respectable, unbribable, honourable, and honest men. They were appointed from the subordinate class of boatmen, and the average service of a man before he obtained an appointment as preventive officer was seventeen years, and under the circumstances it could not be said that the salary which was paid was outrageously extravagant. If they added to the seventeen years the thirteen years which were occupied in reaching the maximum salary in the lower section, it would be seen that thirty years' service would be required to obtain a salary of £150 per annum. The men had not put forward their grievances in an aggressive manner, but had shown great modesty and their case deserved consideration. They were employed on an average 88 Sundays in every year without extra remuneration, and about half of the Sunday work was night duty. The practice of employing men almost regularly on Sundays was contrary to the general spirit of employment as regulated by large public companies, and by other government departments. He appealed for a departmental inquiry to ascertain whether or not the preventive officers were entitled to some remuneration for Sunday work, and said that if a favourable reply was given it might render a division on the vote unnecessary. (Hear, hear.)

Mr. G. Watson urged the Treasury to agree to a small Committee to consider the case of the Customs boatmen.

Sir A. Acland-Wood said since he had

occupied the position of Patronage Secretary he had not been influenced by political considerations in giving nominations to men who desired to enter the service as Customs boatmen. At present a man might have to wait until he was twenty-three years of age before he received an appointment, and he admitted that £55 a year was not a sufficient wage for a man of that age. To meet the grievance it was proposed to alter the age limit, and after May next year, the limit would be from seventeen to twenty years.

Captain Norton urged that in fixing the wages of the Customs watchers the Government should not take into consideration the fact that the men were pensioners. At present a large number of these men received only 21s. per week, and he suggested that the minimum wage should be 24s. per week.

Mr. Causton supported the appeal of his hon. friend. These men had a real grievance, which would be remedied at once if the Financial Secretary to the Treasury would look into it.

Mr. Maconochie (Aberdeenshire, E.) said he agreed that in this country the salaries paid in some cases were too high, but in other cases they were too low; and he would remind the Committee that, though Customs officials abroad were subjected to bribery, there was no possibility of bribing these officers in England. (Hear.)

Mr. C. Devlin (Galway) complained of the great inconvenience which passengers arriving at Londonderry suffered on account of the bad accommodation for the examination of luggage.

Mr. Gibson Bowles, admitting that the mode of appointment was a survival from the past, could not allow that it was necessarily vicious. Equal objection might be made to the system by which naval appointments were made, and there were still many other appointments in gift of the Crown. There was a certain advantage in having personal responsibility for a recommendation and it certainly was not the case that a patronage secretary only gave attention to recommendations from members of his own party. It could not be denied that excellent men were appointed under the system.

Mr. V. Cavendish said that during the past two years the position of the Customs boatmen had been considerably improved.

He had looked into their case, and he did not think they had any substantial grievance to complain of. He admitted the extreme importance of the waterguard officers' duties. As to the complaint of the preventive officers that they had to work on Sundays, it should be remembered that the men entered the service clearly understanding that Sunday labour was expected of them. The department had done everything in its power to reduce Sunday labour; but, considering the conditions of the service, they could not abolish it altogether. Nor could they give extra pay for Sunday, for the wages of the service had been fixed on the basis that the men were to do Sunday work. Concessions had also been given to the Customs watchers, and he could not engage that more would be done for them. But he could promise that the cases of these three classes of Customs officers would be again carefully considered by the department.

Major Evans-Gordon said that, in view of the promise of the Financial Secretary to the Treasury that the cases of the boatmen and preventive officers would be considered, he desired to withdraw the amendment.

The amendment was by leave withdrawn.

Mr. Whitley protested against the whole system of allowances, and asked for information of the item of £1,535 for "star" allowances to boatmen, which was, he said, an entirely new item on the votes. He moved to reduce the vote in respect of allowances by £1,500.

Mr. V. Cavendish said he had been pressed to increase the pay of almost every class of men employed. These "star" allowances included increased pay.

Mr. Dalziel (Kirkcaldy Burghs) said increased pay ought to be given on a certain specified basis. The system of allowances did not work satisfactorily.

Mr. V. Cavendish said these "star" allowances were granted for good conduct and efficiency after ten years' service and twenty years' service.

Mr. Gibson Bowles said these allowances were not a regular increase of pay, but were given at the discretion of the Commissioner of Customs. That was not a satisfactory system.

After some remarks from Mr. Lough,

Sir E. Grey (Northumberland, Berwick) asked for information as to the method by which these allowances for good conduct

P. T. O.

were awarded. Were they given in every case after a number of years' service if no report for misconduct had been made, or were they given only in exceptional cases when an exceptional report was presented?

Mr. V. Cavendish said that the increment was given as a matter of course if there had been no report for misconduct. In future estimates further details should be given.

Mr. Whitley said that he should not divide the House on his reduction. He asked for information as to the sum of £3,000 for rewards for the capture of smugglers.

After some further discussion the motion was by leave withdrawn and the vote was agreed to.

