

As compared with ordinary departments of State, the functions of the Public Trust Office are of a peculiarly distinctive character. It is purely and simply a large business organization, and knowledge on the part of its staff of a special nature, such as accountancy and law in relation to the administration of trust estates and intestacies, is a necessary requisite. Many of the officers, very much to their credit, have qualified by study in these respects, and the good resulting is apparent in the highly satisfactory discharge of the duties assigned to them.

The office has been, and is, short of officers qualified to fill the posts of Accounts Clerks and Examiners. It is here that delay is apt to take place. The work is laborious, and the absence of an Accounts Clerk or Examiner through illness or other cause inevitably produces delay because there is no understudy to take his place, while to fill the vacancy from another department is only to throw that department behind. The work of the Department has been, and is, in arrear, though the arrear is, we are assured, not so great as it was; but an accession of new business or the absence of one of these essential officers would immediately cause the arrears to increase.

The absence of skilled officers and understudies to them is attributed to want of prevision in the past. A sufficient number of cadets was not introduced in time to be educated up to that point of skill and experience which the increasing volume of business has demanded. This drawback will doubtless be partially alleviated as the juniors now in the office come on, but unless they are encouraged to devote themselves to some study of law relating to trusts and the like, and to the principles of accountancy, the process of a return to a proper organization will be slow.

A table will be found with the returns accompanying this report showing the grades into which the officers are divided, and their salaries. The average rate of payment, instead of increasing as one might have expected with the growth of the business, has fallen, and is now lower than that paid in other Departments of the Service. The following table will indicate this:—

Public Trust average—In 1904, £181 13s. per annum; 1909, £164 6s. per annum; 1912, £146 per annum.

Agricultural Department—£300 per annum; experts, £392 per annum.

Lands and Survey Department—£194 per annum.

Whole Service—£162 per annum.

One striking case of underpayment is that of the Cashier. His total receipts over the counter for the half-year ending 30th September last were over half a million. Likewise his payments over the counter for the same period. The total separate transactions for the whole year numbered over 107,000. His salary is £170, with an allowance of £20. Compared with the salaries received for similar posts in other Departments of the Public Service, the inadequacy is at once apparent.

We are of opinion that the salaries of the staff require readjustment, and should, in individual cases, be made more commensurate with the work required of them, if the best men are to be attracted to and retained in the Service.

It is, we think, unfortunate that the question of increased payment of the staff was not taken into account before the reduction in the office charges took place.

In addition to a readjustment and increase in salaries as indicated, we also think that promotion in the skilled departments should be made according to fitness for the post, and not on the grounds of seniority in age and service, unless accompanied by equality of ability. This is eminently necessary in an office whose work is of such a special character as that of the Public Trust, and is the more requisite now that Deputy Trustees have been created, where special business aptitudes and not seniority of service must be the paramount consideration.

Having regard to the distinctive character of the work to be performed, we would strongly emphasize the necessity of full weight and consideration being given thereto by those who will in future be charged with making the appointments and regulating the salaries.