

Swiss women's suffrage

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SWISS WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

Swiss women are extremely well protected in law, much better than in many countries where women have been able to go to the poll for a long time. There is a great difference between Swiss voting and that of other countries. It is that everywhere else a citizen has nothing but an election right which he can only use every few years, and possibly in some local elections. Switzerland, on the other hand, is the only country with direct democracy, where the citizen has the right to express an opinion on a great variety of subjects. In fact, the people are able to make the laws.

The Federal Constitution grants the Swiss citizen three direct controls on decisions by Government and Parliament: the **Compulsory Referendum** — any amendment to the Constitution must go to the people and only becomes law if a majority of voters and Cantons accept it. The **Optional Referendum** — if, within three months, 30,000 voters or eight Cantons demand it, any proposed legislation must be put to the vote of the people. The **Constitutional Initiative** — if 50,000 voters demand an amendment to the Constitution, a public vote must be taken. There are plenty of examples: the people deciding in 1920 that Switzerland should join the League of Nations; the electorate voting **for** the continuation of Government price control a few years ago, and **against** civil defence service for women and **against** state-controlled TV; five years ago the people empowered the Government to introduce measures to curb the excessive economic boom; the students last year successfully used the Referendum to voice their opposition to the re-organising plans for the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, and the voters agreed with them. The people have to vote on new arterial roads, alpine tunnels, new traffic laws and national defence, and the voters' duties do not end at national level; they cover cantonal and local issues — in some Communes, even the annual budget has to be submitted to the electorate's approval. It is surprising, therefore, that many Swiss women feel they are not yet ready to take on so much responsibility, and this is the answer to the Editor's surprised question why there should be anti-suffrage organisations.

Just because Switzerland is the oldest democracy of the modern world, it is also a masculine democracy. There is still the deep-rooted conception that voting goes with the bearing of arms. If, like in other countries, Parliament could introduce the vote for women, Switzerland would have had it long ago. It is easier to get a majority amongst 200 parliamentarians than to win over a 2½-million electorate!

In addition, Swiss women take an active part in running the country, even if not on the political scene. They enjoy the same schooling and training facilities; universities have been open to them since well over 100 years ago — the first woman doctor in

Europe was a Swiss who graduated in 1874 (Marie Heim-Voegtlin). We have women university professors, scientists, business managers, artists, authors, musicians, conductors, ministers of the Church, lawyers and civil servants, doctors and women members of the armed forces. Women sit on commissions of experts dealing with all manner of subjects from health to social insurance, from orphan care to film censorship, from price control to defence. They are justices of the peace and labour advisors. There are women members of the International Red Cross Committee, and here we remember their tremendous part during the war. Of the 2400 Swiss helpers in the Prisoners of War Organisation in Geneva, most were women workers.

There is a small village in the Canton of Berne, Limpach, where a few years ago (possibly it is still the same today), the Commune Clerk and the Commune Treasurer were women, the verger was a woman, the post mistress, and the woman who delivers the mail; the local cobbler's, the building contractor's, one of the finest farms in the district and the dairy — all run by women! Let anyone say that the Swiss woman is not capable! It is not a sign of primitive reaction if she feels she wants to be better informed before taking on political responsibilities, but she is learning and gaining experience. Progress is slow, and there is no doubt that she will get the right to vote before long.

She is no political outcast and she is certainly not to be pitied. Her position is a secure one. The moment of reaching her full political maturity will fall in a vital period of the new space era. The Swiss woman will then have an enviable position. For she will have more power and responsibility than women anywhere else in the world.—M.M.

CONGRATULATIONS . . .

The Mullers are doing it!

☆ FROM TARANAKI comes the news that Brian Muller, of Eltham, has again been chosen as an All Black to tour South Africa this year. Of Swiss descent and a member of the Taranaki Club, Brian, a giant of a man weighing over 18 stone, was also selected to tour with the 1967 All Blacks to the British Isles and France.

☆ FROM AUCKLAND Roland Muller, son of Mr and Mrs Arthur W. Muller, 325 Hillsborough Road, Mt. Roskill, is achieving top marks in the sheet metal trade. He was awarded the coveted Challenge Trophy for the highest points in the trade certificate examinations recently.