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Autor: Lipson, Leslie M.
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DEMOCRACY IN SWITZERLAND.

(WINTER COURSE TALK ON "DEMOCRACY THROUGH THE AGES")

by

Professor Leslie M.Lipson of Victoria University College,Wellington.

(Professor Lipson has very kindly authorised us to publish in our "Helvetia" his recent Radio talk on this subject, and we wish to reiterate here our sincere thanks for this courtesy.)

"One hundred and thirty-nine years ago the French conqueror and dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte, seized control of Switzerland. He was busy at the familiar game of swallowing up independent European nations doing it in just the same way as we have seen it happen in the last five years. Switzerland had a democratic tradition in its system of government, and for more than five centuries it had an enviable record of resistance against foreign aggression. So when Napoleon took the country, people in Britain felt about it in much the same way as we felt when we saw Czechoslovakia go, or Norway, or Greece. At that time, in 1802, an English versifier, William Wordsworth, wrote a poem which he called "England and Switzerland". Here are its first two stanzas:

"Two voices are there, one is of the Sea,
One of the Mountains, each a mighty voice:
In both from age to age thou didst rejoice,
They were thy chosen music, Liberty!

There came a tyrant, and with holy glee
Thou fought'st against him, - but hast vainly striven:
Thou from thy Alpine holds at length art driven
Where not a torrent murmurs heard by thee."

Now, I didn't read that to you for you to enjoy its poetical qualities, because, as poetry, it's rather poor stuff. But I did read it for the sake of its political science. Wordsworth had the acuteness to realise the connection between politics and geography. England has maintained its independence for centuries, and has avoided autocratic forms of government internally, largely because it is an island. Switzerland has preserved her freedom against aggressors, and has had a tradition of self-government, largely because of its mountains. The Alps have helped Swiss democracy as much as the North Sea and the Channel have aided British democracy.

Not only has geography contributed to Swiss independence; it has also moulded the governmental system internally. In an exceptionally mountainous country the people are split up into numerous self-contained, virtually isolated, communities. Separated from each other in their mountain valleys and along the shores of their lakes, the Swiss have inevitably based their political organisation on two vital principles - maximum decentralisation and maximum participation by citizens. Let's see how that works out in practice. Decentralisation of government is determined by the mountains themselves. Napoleon ignored nature when he tried to centralise Swiss government on the French model. But the attempt was a dismal failure. The Swiss people have a strong sense of localism; they have a keen local pride and loyalty. And their democratic system has not tried to flout this ingrained sentiment. Wisely it has built upon that localism and made it the foundation of its strength. Thus Swiss democracy has been built from the bottom upwards. Its local governments are a natural, organic, growth; whilst its central government is something of an artificial creation. The pattern of Swiss institutions is federal; and in certain respects it resembles the federal system of the United States. The origins of the Swiss confederation are much older, of course, than the United States. Indeed they go back to the year 1291. But, when the Constitution was remodelled in 1848, some American features were incorporated into it.

To describe Swiss federalism you have to start at the localities and work towards the centre. The foundation is composed of about 3000 local bodies, called communes, and these possess a large amount of control over local affairs. These communes are so important to the political system, that a Swiss derives his citizenship from his rights as a member of one of them. National citizenship is based upon local citizenship. Then, above the communes, come the cantons. Their place in the governmental structure is an intermediate one between the communes below and the federal government above. In other words, they resemble the States in the American or the Australian federal union or the Provinces in Canada. There are 22 of these cantons and they have very wide powers. A Swiss feels loyalty not only to his commune but also to his canton. Without the cantons Swiss democracy could not function successfully. The geography of the country, as well as the local patriotism would not permit an overwieldy central government and a chaotic array of several thousand local governments with no cement in between. Finally, at the top of the pryamid, lies the central government. Its powers are strictly limited by the terms of the federal constitution; and although in recent years the international economic difficulties and the international political situation have forced the central government to extend its powers, the cantons and the commune still play the more important part in the life of the individual citizen.

Besides this decentralisation the other notable feature is the direct participation by citizens in government. Last week I mentioned to you the problem of adjusting democratic machinery to large areas and large numbers of people. Our modern democracies have tried to meet the difficulty by the representative system. In effect, we choose others at election time to do our job. This has meant that the direct participation of the average citizen in public affairs is quite small. Every few years we may vote for a Parliamentary candidate; now and then perhaps we sit on a jury. But unless we become a member of Parliament or take up a career as a public servant or serve on some local body, we don't take any share ourselves in the work of government. Now this is a serious weakness of modern democracy. If we participate in any organisation, we get an active interest in it and we want to see that it is a success. Our modern democracies are too much crowded with spectators and too lacking in doers. On this point the Swiss stand out as a very striking exception. They really believe that government of the people should also be government by the people; and they have made a most determined effort to maximise popular participation in public affairs. In their smaller communes, for instance, the supreme governing body is simply a meeting of all the citizens and they assemble together anything from two to six times a year. All matters of importance have to be brought up before a meeting of the whole citizen body for decision. In the intervals between meetings the commune is administered by a small executive committee chosen at the citizens' assembly and directly responsible to it.

The Swiss manage this system even with towns of 10,000 inhabitants, where the citizen body will number over 3000. (We must remember, of course, that in Switzerland women don't vote or participate in government; which is a definite defect in their democracy and reduces the number of citizens.) However, this method of direct citizen control can't be applied in the larger cities. It wouldn't work, for example, in Zurich which is almost double the size of Wellington. Nor would it work in a whole canton, nor in the federal government. But the Swiss don't like to abandon the principle of direct participation which they think is fundamentally democratic. So as a substitute they use the two devices called the referendum and the initiative. Under the referendum there is provision in the larger communes and in the cantons and in the central government for certain measures to be submitted to popular vote - just as we in New Zealand periodically decide by popular vote on the licensing question. The referendum is quite commonly used in Switzerland for all types of measures, and the general opinion is that it has worked well there. Then, in addition they have the initiative. This gives the people the right to suggest constitutional changes; and, if 50,000 signatures can be obtained for a proposal it will be duly submitted to a vote. Thus the Swiss make a real attempt to ensure that the people themselves have the last say on all questions which vitally concern their well-being. And, if that isn't democratic, well - what is?

One feature of their system deserves attention, that is the arrangement for choosing the Cabinet or the political heads of administrative departments. We are familiar with the British method of having a Cabinet formed out of members of Parliament; and normally our Cabinets are entirely composed of people who belong to the same party. The American method is to have a President or a Governor elected by the people and placed outside of the Legislature. The Swiss practice differs from both of these; and it is indeed a remarkable tribute to the flexibility of democratic institutions that at least three major types exist, each with its own special merits and defects. In the Swiss federal government the Cabinet is simply and literally an executive committee of the legislature. This federal executive has seven members and these are chosen by the two Houses of the Legislature voting in a joint session. A peculiarity of the Executive is that it regularly contains leading representatives of two or three different parties. For instance, in 1939 there were 4 Liberals, 2 Conservatives, and 1 from the Peasants' Party in the Executive. It is a well recognised tradition of Swiss government that these representatives of various parties must co-operate together and sink their political differences while they administer the policies laid down by the Legislature. It follows that there is no collective responsibility of the whole Cabinet as we know it under the British practice. One member may be removed from office without his colleagues in the Executive being at all implicated in his defeat. In practice, once a man is elected to the Federal Executive he is usually re-elected for successive terms as long as he carries out his duties reasonably well. A result of the whole system is that the Legislature is definitely master of the Executive; whereas under the British system the Cabinet invariably becomes the master of Parliament. Observers of Swiss institutions say that the system works well. But I should point out that the Socialist Party has been excluded from the Federal Executive up to now; and it is also argued that the Swiss method does not encourage strong leadership in the same way as the British or the American system.

As you can see, though, this practice of multi-party executives can only succeed among a people endowed with good commonsense who meet their problems in a general spirit of compromise. That is the very characteristic of Swiss democracy which commands our admiration. We are all too bitterly accustomed to the international rivalries of Germans, Frenchmen and Italians. Yet there in Switzerland you have a hybrid nation composed of those very three elements. The German-speaking Swiss form over 70% of the total; some 20% are French-speaking and under 10% talk Italian for their native tongue. Between these different cultural and national groups there is a minimum of friction and ill-feeling. Switzerland is a very fine working model on a small scale of genuine international collaboration. It was no accident that the League of Nations, the International Labour office, the Red Cross, the Universal Postal Union, and other international agencies, have established their headquarters in Switzerland. That little democracy is a microcosm of the world as I should like to see in the future. "

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