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# DO SWISS WOMEN REALLY WANT THE RIGHT TO VOTE?

Switzerland treats its women so unjustly that it ranks among the most primitive countries in the world. The only other countries which deny their women the right to vote are Lichtenstein, Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, moslem countries for the most part, where women are confined to harems and not even allowed to show their faces.

As a proof that this uncivilised anomaly still recently had a live backing among Swiss males, the 1959 referendum on the issue of equal federal-political rights for women produced 654,939 "no" against 323,727 "yes" ballots.

Still, the seed has been sown and the number of women-backers has increased gradually, so much so that during the '60s over 50 votes on the political rights of women were held on the cantonal and communal levels. Vaud and Neuchatel were the first cantons to grant their women a say in cantonal affairs (1959), Geneva followed in 1960, Basle-town in 1966, Basle-country in 1968, Ticino and Fribourg in 1969. All these cantons except Basle-land have also given women the right of vote in communal issues. Graubunden, Berne and Zurich have allowed their communes to vote themselves the female right of vote.

Now this portentous problem has reached the federal level once again. The Federal Council has submitted to Parliament a proposed improvement of the 74th article of the Federal Constitution. The Council backs its proposal in a 40-page "message" designed to answer every critic.

The isolation of Switzerland was not a determining factor. It was rather the contradiction between the increasing important role played by women in the economy, the increased freedom of their lives and the "woman at home" image. This called for a more realistic attitude towards the problem of women's right of vote.

What is more surprising is that the message contains lengthy arguments to convince the women who **don't** want the right to vote! No, it says, the right of vote will not imperil the condition of women, neither in their homesteads nor in society. No, the right of vote will not tend to increase the disinterest in direct democracy. Yes, women **can** bring constructive views on the problems affecting them more particularly, even though they may be less interested in other more specifically masculine topics.

There is a "Union of Swiss women for the female right of vote" and there is the pending "Union of Swiss Women **against** the female right of vote". The first union probably gathers together all the intellectual, politically-active, aggressive, "proud-to-be-women, men-with-the-baby, equal-opportunity-for-women, no-

more-downtreading" elements. They stage banner-carrying processions, meet in committees and send representatives to the European Human Right Convention. The second is less publicised and less typified. A few years ago in Zurich, when the right of vote for women came up and was rejected by the people, it placarded a very conspicuous bill reading "Totale Verpolitisierung unseres Lebens? NEIN!" all over the city.

These militant elements, fighting against the right of vote, may be getting rarer to find, but the fact remains that the overall majority of Swiss women are just not interested in the political equality which their men are gradually working out for them. The reporter for the "Europa" programme on BBC 2 (Thursday, 19th January) discovered that for himself when he interviewed a good half-dozen women on the beach in Geneva and could not elicit one enthusiastic answer. A Swiss lady of my acquaintance, who watched the programme, was appalled by the lack of ambition of her compatriots. Although this may be arguable, it seems that Swiss women are more subdued and less open to the world at large than their French and English counterparts. For this reason, there's no saying that Swiss women would appreciate being vested with the moral obligation of going to the poll, they may even find it a little embarrassing! The majority of women are not ready in their minds to seize the right of vote, the majority of men are probably not much further ahead. After all, only five cantons have given their women the full right to vote, and, since the referendum must draw a "yes" not only from the majority of the people, but also from the majority of the cantons, the odds are that the time is not yet ripe for such a referendum. (P.M.B.)

—The Swiss Observer

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## OUR FIERY ANCESTORS

(Continued)

### THE DISASTROUS EXODUS

Caesar's refusal to tolerate the passage of a vagrant horde through Roman territory may readily be understood. But how are we to explain his continued hostility to the migration when the Helvetii had chosen another route which, crossing the Jura further north and passing by arrangement through the lands of the Sequani, no longer touched Transalpine Gaul? Was it the calculation of a politician, determined to provoke a conflict for the sake of the prestige which victory would bring? The imputation is not wholly just: the interests of Rome were involved as well as the personal ambitions of Caesar, for the establishment in western Gaul of a new Helvetian state near the Roman frontier might well be thought to represent a menace to the Roman peace. Whatever may have been his motives, Caesar took the offensive;