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SWITZERLAND AND THE COMMON MARKET

THE FIRST PART of this article was published in last month's "Helvetia". It concerned Switzerland signing an agreement on 22nd July 1972 in Brussels with the European Economic Community (EEC) which provides in particular, for the progressive abolition of customs duties on all industrial products. Mr Ernst Brugger, Head of the Federal Department of Public Economy, continues, in part two, to answer questions about that agreement:

What was the content of the declaration relating to foreign workers which caused a stir in a section of the Swiss press?

By this joint declaration on the occasion of the signing of the free trade agreement, the Parties noted with satisfaction the result of the discussions between Switzerland and Italy. Our policy of stabilisation is, moreover, expressly recognised by the EEC.

Will the status of our compatriots who work in a Common Market country be improved as a result of the agreement concluded on 22nd July 1972?

The declaration which I have just mentioned does not refer only to the position in Switzerland of workers from the EEC but also to that of our compatriots living in members countries of that economic organisation. Taking into account the considerable number of Swiss working temporarily or permanently in one or other of those countries, it does indeed seem advisable that, in the future too, we should be able to examine their problems within this framework whenever it appears to be necessary.

What will be the effects of the new agreement on the Swiss consumer?

Nearly 85% of Swiss imports of consumer goods come from the enlarged Common Market. It is still difficult to foresee to what extent the lowering of customs barriers will directly affect prices in our country. In general, our customs duties are already quite low. We ought therefore to guard against over-optimism, for an annual reduction of between 1 and 2% in customs protection could hardly affect prices perceptibly, subject as they are to the severe inflationary pressure being experienced by Europe today.

But we can hope that the consumer will notice some positive effects in certain important sectors, particularly in clothing and furnishing, which are still subject to relatively high customs duties. We also expect some indirect results. Thus the strengthening of competition ought also to benefit the consumer. What appears to be decisive in the longer term, however, is that the consolidation of our economic prosperity, to which the agreement must contribute, will increase consumer purchasing power.

Does the agreement provide for collaboration between Switzerland and the EEC in the technological field? and in the monetary field?

The free trade agreement does not provide for collaboration between Switzerland and the Common Market in those two spheres, but the EEC and our country already co-operate in the technological sector on the basis of other arrangements. Moreover, the monetary authorities are, of course, also in contact. In the future these various forms of collaboration will certainly be intensified.

Does this agreement constitute a final point in our negotiations with the Common Market or, on the contrary, a first step?

The agreement establishes a lasting bond between Switzerland and the European market. However, our country will have periodically to re-examine all her relationships with the EEC. Closer collaboration in fields which are not covered by the free trade agreement must not be excluded. Our relations are, in fact, extremely diverse. It must be stressed, however, that, whatever their importance, any new arrangements will always have to respect the main principles of our foreign policy.

Does the agreement provide for certain transfers of competences to organs of the EEC?

No, Switzerland is not transferring any competence to the various organs of the EEC. As to the Joint Committee for which the agreement provides, it can take decisions only by mutual agreement. Its main purpose will be to serve as a forum for the discussions and the contacts made necessary by the agreement.

Does the agreement contain provisions which would ultimately facilitate Switzerland's possible political integration into Europe?

No. The agreement concerns the exchange of goods. Even the other spheres in which closer co-operation might one day be shown to be necessary are mainly economic in character: transport, protection of the environment, technology, monetary questions. As to collaboration in the political field, that would be contrary to our policy of neutrality.

Do you consider that the results obtained are satisfactory for Switzerland?

The Brussels agreement can be regarded as very satisfactory. It enables your country to avoid commercial isolation while completely preserving her political freedom. In a sense we were even fortunate to be able to conclude an agreement with such a content.

The new free trade agreement will certainly entail a further increase in the volume of our trade with the Common Market countries. Our policy of neutrality, however, recommends us to diversify our trade; how do you envisage a reconciliation between these two divergent trends?

The purpose of the agreement is not to increase Western Europe's share in our external trade, but rather to establish comparable and fair conditions of competition. Switzerland attaches

great importance to the universality of her external relations, in the economic as well as the political sphere. We shall therefore continue our efforts to achieve further advances in the liberalisation of trade on a world scale. New negotiations in this direction are already on the horizon.

What will happen to EFTA after the departure of those countries which have joined the EEC?

The entry to the EEC of some member states of EFTA will not mean the end of free trade in industrial products between the countries which belong to the Association. The customs franchise which has been established will be maintained on the basis of the EFTA Convention.

Can we expect a rapprochement of EFTA towards other European states (Spain, Yugoslavia, etc.) which are not yet members of any economic grouping?

EFTA will retain its open character vis-a-vis the outside world and a rapprochement towards other European countries is therefore not excluded.

The agreement concluded on 22nd July 1972 will probably be submitted to the people and to the cantons; according to eminent jurists, the Federal Constitution does not provide for consultation of this kind and we would be having a sort of plebiscite; what were the Federal Council's reasons for proposing such a vote when it refrained from holding one at the time of Switzerland's joining EFTA?

It is true that the Constitution does not provide for agreements of this kind to be submitted to a referendum, but nor does it exclude the possibility. Large sections of the population have for some time felt that the citizens ought to be given an opportunity to express an opinion on the agreement which will regulate our relations with the EEC. The text which we signed would create precisely that lasting tie which Switzerland has for years wished to establish. Our economy would undoubtedly be placed in a new situation. Finally, the vote would give our young fellow citizens an excellent chance — and these are rather rare — to familiarise themselves with the problems of foreign policy.

* * *

As the Federal Councillor pointed out at the end of his statement, the agreement could be put to the people in a referendum. This was done, and the Swiss electorate accepted it on 2nd and 3rd December 1972 with a majority of 1,345,057 against 509,350 votes. This meant acceptance by 72.5% and rejection by 27.5% of the voters. Voting participation was 51.2%. All the Cantons accepted.

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