

Comment : planning the future

Autor(en): **P.M.B.**

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● COMMENT.—

PLANNING THE FUTURE

The energy crisis has been most efficient in making us aware of the limits to the natural resources of this planet and the fundamental precariousness of our supplies. Shortages in other commodities such as sugar, wheat and even toilet paper has brought home the fact that we, as a growing population, must share goods available in limited and sometimes diminishing quantities. Recent events have also shown that our supplies can be upset by relatively minor upheavals. Paper was in short supply this year because of a strike in Canada. Sugar was unavailable because of price fluctuations which have caused exporters to sell it elsewhere than in Britain. Wheat has shot up in price because of bad harvests, and the same will happen to feed grains with delayed consequences on the price of meat—because of disastrous conditions in the United States.

The world's growing concern for its problems of supply, population growth and conservation was reflected this year by a number of very important conferences. The Law of the Sea Conference which has just adjourned in Caracas, Venezuela, was concerned with resources. In April, the United Nations held a special General Assembly to discuss the protection of the natural resources of developing countries. Last year, the United Nations sponsored the first world conference on the environment in Stockholm and last month, it organised the world's first population congress in Bucharest.

This concern is expressed with varying emphasis in individual countries. Switzerland is particularly concerned with environmental protection because of her small size, large population, high standards in respect of the quality of life, advanced economic development and great natural beauty. The coexistence of these factors carries a number of contradictions which have lent particular urgency to problems of the environment in our small country. The fact that the environment has now been discussed at world level indicates the need for a common approach and the necessity to do something about the problem. In Switzerland, the debate has been mainly held at parliamentary level and has led to new legislation on land planning, and to a referendum on the matter.

A great new idea of modern times is that the future can be controlled by creating, today, the right circumstances. So far, western countries have laid emphasis on their economic development and have gleefully expanded economically without too much consideration on the side-effects of this policy. But now, the West, and particularly Switzerland, has accepted that the future has to be *planned* and that the trend of the past two decades cannot be left uncorrected.

One of the things covered by planning is population. It is not envisaged at this stage to fix a national target for population growth and influence individual families in their fertility. In fact, Switzerland has a small demographic growth which is not expected to push popu-

lation to much more than seven millions by the turn of the century. But even if the population only rises by a million during the next thirty years, it will still be necessary to organise the way these new inhabitants will live and work. Urban distribution and accommodation will have to be planned. There is some political uncertainty attached to the problem, since an initiative like the one heralding the 20th October Referendum on foreign presence can obviously affect population forecasts.

Planning also touches on economic development. Establishing growth rates, calculating curves in production, employment and traffic has a meaning for individual income. Planning in this respect really consists in deciding whether or not we should be more prosperous. Deciding on our optimal individual wealth would obviously depend on outside factors, such as world supply of commodities and the buoyancy of world trade. It is therefore impossible to make long term forecasts which, incidentally would also be related to the problem of foreign labour. By keeping many foreigners in their country, the Swiss are preserving a precious aid to their prosperity. But this presence has its disadvantages and the choice facing the people is: Are we prepared to maintain our prosperity, or become even richer, with the help of a vast supply of outside manpower, or do we consider the economic benefits of so many foreigners as not worth the disadvantages. Not all the Swiss who will vote for the repatriation of a sizeable part of the foreign resident population see the problem in this light. They believe that their standards of living will not be affected by their decision.

Planning generally deals with figures and statistics. A federal commission chaired by Mr Alois Huerlimann, a national councillor, is currently at work on finding the optimal road map of the country. It has recently produced data on commuting to and from work. It established that the Swiss on average take 15.2 minutes to go to work, and that 44 per cent of them go by foot. The average distance covered by all those who do not work at home is 4.3 km. This distance is covered on average 2.9 times a day, with the result that the Swiss spend about threequarters of an hour a day in commuting. Students have been found to take far longer because of the much larger distances they have to travel.

One wonders whether this data has immediate relevance to planning road transport, or whether it was collected for the pleasure of pure knowledge. But the effort does remind us that working is only one part of our active life. Transportation also has a bearing on the quality of life, and it should be possible to establish an optimal time of journey, bearing in mind the physical and mental effects of commuting. The figures released by the Huerlimann commission indicate that every part of our lives, considered for a large sample of people, can be measured and quantified. These statistical results may not be particularly relevant to the solution of individual problems, but aim nevertheless at controlling the future of society as a whole. However, these studies must be guided by the principle that the welfare of man should be placed above everything else. —P.M.B.