

Home affairs

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HOME AFFAIRS.

by MAX NEF.

The national form of the so-called "direct democracy", such as exists in Switzerland, makes it necessary for the citizen to be called upon, time and again, to take a personal attitude towards state affairs, by means of referendums and elections, and this, not only in regard to questions which affect the State as a whole, but also in regard to such matters as concern the territory of a Canton, or even that of a Commune.

Because of the relatively weak participation of voters in such referendums and elections, which occurs frequently, the conclusion is often drawn that the citizen's interest in the political life of his own country is on the decline. Political observers are inclined to explain that this is due to the fact that the number of referendums is too great.

A more careful enquiry into the matter shows, however, that the foregoing criticism is not justified. In so far as the average participation of voters in Federal Referendums is concerned, for example, it may be stated that these are subjected to only very insignificant fluctuations; fluctuations which in no way indicate any definite tendency towards a decline. Since the foundation of the Swiss Confederation in 1848, the Swiss citizens have had to vote on about 180 Federal Bills, by means of referendums. A comparison of the period elapsing between 1848 and the turn of the century, with that — which is practically of the same length — between 1900 and to-day, shows that the percentual participation in the voting, amounting to about 57 per cent for both periods, has remained more or less unchanged. Furthermore, if one proceeds to compare periods of ten years with each other, one finds that the proportion varies very slightly. Thus, it is not true that in the "Young Swiss Democracy" — that is to say in the democracy following immediately after its foundation — the citizens were much more zealous and numerous in regard to voting.

The average participation in referendums does not provide sufficient information regarding the Swiss citizen's interest in State affairs. Still other criteria must be taken into consideration. If one considers the referendums which have had the highest and the lowest participation, it becomes apparent that the *subject matter* of a Draft Bill also plays a very important role. The highest participation of the citizens in a vote occurred in 1922, when it reached the figure of 86 per cent, and concerned a Federal Referendum on a Draft Bill proposing a very heavy levy by the State on property, to be carried out only once. This Draft Bill was rejected in an unequivocal manner. The lowest figure ever attained in a referendum amounted to only 33 per cent, and occurred three years previously, when it was a matter of approving the technical provisions for the execution of the proportional system for elections to the National Council, which had already been decided upon in principle.

Greater absenteeism on the part of voters, however, is to be observed not only in regard to the undisputed Draft Bills of a more formal character. It occurs also in such cases where the citizen is called upon to decide on technically complicated questions or on matters of a specialised nature, the effects of which cannot be gauged without the possession of

professional knowledge. Such cases occur more frequently today than they did formerly, when questions of principle, which could be judged more easily from the political and wordly point of view, were submitted to the people's vote.

But, even if, today, direct democracy is thereby subjected to heavy trial loads, this is in no way in contradiction with the principle of this form of government, which leaves to the citizens the final decision regarding all the important problems of State. It is, however, the duty of the Parties, which constitute the link between the State and the People, to facilitate the task of the latter, by providing the citizens with clear facts and information on the matter in question, to a greater extent than is done at present, before the referendum takes place.

Finally, it should be mentioned that, here in Switzerland, a considerable difference exists in regard to the extent of the participation in voting, from Canton to Canton. This is due partly to the fact that in some Cantons voting is obligatory whilst in others it is not. Furthermore, it often happens that, in regard to one and the same matter, there is both a Federal Referendum and a Cantonal election taking place in one Canton, whereas in another the citizens have only to express their opinion in regard to the Federal Draft Bill.

In conclusion, it may be said that the relatively small number of votes which are frequently registered does not give rise to any undue anxiety; anyway, not so long as the voters belong, more or less equally, to the various age groups, trades and professions, and classes of the citizenry.

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