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AN EDITOR SPEAKS.

By PIERRE BÉGUIN.

“The Jurassian Separatism”.

For some years past a movement has been growing within the French-speaking minority in the Canton of Berne in favour of the territory inhabited by this minority becoming an autonomous Canton. Hitherto it has been difficult to ascertain the amplitude of this movement, but a precise indication of it has just been obtained. A Popular Initiative has been launched and has proved successful. It may now, therefore, be admitted that there really exists a wish to separate the two linguistic parts of the Canton of Berne. However, only a vote carried out duly and formally, in a secret ballot, will give a thoroughly convincing indication.

Switzerland enjoys inestimable good fortune in that she has no minority problems. In spite of the fact that our country is extremely diverse, that it possesses three national languages and that two religions exist side by side, nowhere in it is there to be found a population which has the right to complain of being subject to a majority, and of being prevented from the free expansion of its profound aspirations.

We owe this fortunate state of affairs primarily to the federalism of our State, which is composed of twenty-two Cantons, autonomous to a large extent, especially in the educational and religious domain. In the French-speaking region we have two Cantons of which the population has a French-speaking majority, but which also comprises German-speaking minorities. This duality has never given rise to any problems. But there is a third Canton in which the linguistic problem has been growing more and more acute during the course of the last forty years. This is the Canton of Berne. It consists mostly of German-speaking Protestants. A century ago, however, when the Vienna Treaty deprived it of those regions over which it dominated under the Ancient Régime, it was given, in lieu of compensation, the French-speaking Jura, possessing a majority of Roman Catholics. For this minority, in any case, this proved to be a marriage of convenience, if not, indeed, a forced marriage!

For nearly a century, things proceeded in a relatively satisfactory manner. But for about forty years now there have been manifestations of what is called in the matrimonial language “incompatibility of character”. Even if no really well-founded complaint can be formulated, the French-speaking minority has shown an increasingly definite aspiration towards the constitution of an autonomous Canton. The separatist movement, which started during the First World-War, and then remained dormant for several years, awakened once more after the Second World-War. Since then it has proceeded to gain both amplitude and vigour. It is directed by persevering and clever men who have succeeded, with a great deal of efficiency, in mobilising public opinion.

This situation became a matter of conscience for the Confederates belonging to the other Cantons. To support the separatist tendencies meant causing a

prejudice to the unity of one of the members of the Confederation. To ignore these tendencies and to thwart them meant opposing an aspiration towards autonomy, which might be legitimate. A great many Swiss citizens waited for proof to be forthcoming that the French-speaking Jurassians, politically attached to the Canton of Berne, where the majority of the inhabitants speak German, were really desirous of enjoying an autonomy. Faced with this dilemma they wished for a plebiscite to take place, which would make it possible to know what was the real tendency within the Jurassian minority.

The separatists gauged this obstacle carefully. They launched a Popular Initiative, on the Bernese Cantonal plane, which raised the question as to whether a plebiscite should be organised in the Bernese Jura in order to discover what are the real sentiments of the population. It is quite clear that this Initiative will be rejected as the German-speaking majority of the Canton of Berne has no intention of subscribing to a separation between the two parts of the Bernese State. But, as a matter of fact, this Initiative has no other aim than to make a census possible. If it is approved in the minority regions it will be necessary to come to the conclusion that the aspiration to autonomy is evident and that it must be satisfied. Such an indication will be of great value to those Confederates who are faced with the dilemma already mentioned, namely that of striking a blow against the unity of a Confederate State through the support they give to the separatist tendencies, or, on the contrary, of thwarting such separatist tendencies if they are real and should be respected.

We now possess a first indication, in that we know that the Initiative in question was signed by 57 per cent of the population of the minority region. It is possible that a good many of the signatories yielded to pressure and to the fear of displeasing those around them. The signature of an Initiative is a public act, whereas the definite voting takes place by means of a secret ballot. Nevertheless, the success achieved by the separatists is undeniable. It brings with it an element of appreciation that can no longer be neglected.

We are, therefore, faced with the fact that a minority problem does exist at present in our country. The fact that it did not exist until now was a matter of pride to us. We regret that it should have arisen just now, at a time when other autonomies are being scoffed at openly in other parts of the world, and when the question submitted to the Swiss People appears to be, to a large extent, both artificial and untimely.

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