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# The Swiss Observer

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EDITOR: Pierre-Michel Béguin

Advisory Council: R. J. KELLER (Chairman)

GOTTFRIED KELLER (Vice-Chairman)

O. F. BOEHRINGER, J. EUSEBIO,

Dr. C. JAGMETTI (Press Attaché Swiss Emb.),

A. KUNZ, C. NATER, R. M. SUESS.

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# COMMENT

## THOSE INDILIGENT VOTERS

30% of the electorate took the trouble to go to the polls at the last federal votation, — that concerning new constitutional dispositions on land development. The most diligent voting-canton was Aargau, with 54% of voting presence, the great absenteeists were Geneva (12%), Vaud (12.8%) and Basle (13.7%). Voting behaviour reflects milieu, age and profession, an enquiry into cantonal voting habits would therefore necessarily be of a sociological nature. As a rule, the cantons of Western Switzerland and the more urban cantons are bad voters whereas the small and more rural cantons, like the "Waldstätten", show up a far better voting attendance. This cantonal disparity could give useful indications as to why the Swiss take their right to vote, after all an indispensable and precious right, more and more casually.

Living in Zurich, I have known one clearly-cut case of the faithful and regular voter, and one of the casual and slovenly voter, who grumbled at the irksome walk to the polls on voting-Sundays.

The first was a 65-year old book-keeper, that is, of lower middle-class background. To him, voting was an almost sacred duty, which he performed punctiliously, looking down on those who neglected it. He was highly patriotic and believed most firmly in the Swiss order of things. Fundamentally conservative, he had experienced little of the world outside Switzerland, having lived all his life in the same town and in the same house. In his particular case, I would say that the motivations to vote came in the following order: to entertain the firmly

established conscience of being a good citizen; a highly developed sense of civic responsibility, derived from his upbringing, in which the act of voting, quite apart from its practical effect, had an important symbolic significance; concern for the object of the vote.

Needless to say, this order could vary. In the more educated of conscientious voters, the first two reasons would change places. In the case of highly important issues, the last one would come first.

The "bad voter" of my acquaintance was a middle-aged engineer who held a highly responsible position and possessed a villa in a residential area. He did not hail from Zurich and had travelled extensively around the world. He would scowl when, on his return, he would find his voters' envelope in his mail. Reasons for his not voting would be: lack of concern with the object of the vote; difficulty of associating his responsibility as a Swiss citizen with the duty to vote, this being tied with the formalistic and purely representative procedure voting has now become; too frequent calls to the polls and the practical nuisance implied.

These first two points deserve to be examined more closely.

The object of a vote can be of varying interest to the common citizen. He usually turns up fairly regularly at those votations that concern him directly or have a particular meaning. Such topics as Swiss nuclear weapons, womens' vote, midnight closing-time for dancings and bars, legislation on supersonic transport (or any other topic which closely affects the citizen's life or awakens his interest) would attract a greater number of voters than questions of supply or local elections. The electorate is not called to decide on every technical question concerning his commune. The town, or cantonal council, may take decisions without the people's verdict being asked for. This depends on whether the issue lies in these councils' competence. In many cases however, the voter is called to make a choice on purely technical issues. Does he agree to an expenditure of 200,000 francs for enlarging a home for the aged? Does he want a cemetery along the Niklausstrasse or should the town have a modernised crematorium? Does he think half a million ought to be spent on enlarging the stretch of road near Spätzeliberg? Or he may be asked to choose three totally unknown names out of a list of twelve practically unknown parties, or pick a name from a column of highly respectable but totally unheard-of citizens, candidates to some important public function.

The pettiness or technicality of the voting matter is doubtless one reason why the proportion of voters is so small. On September 14th, the people of Schwytz ruled out a decision by their cantonal council to allocate 1.2 million francs to the enlargement of

the "normal" school of Rickenbach, shared by one half of Appenzell and Liechtenstein. In this particular case, the people clearly knew what they were voting against — the excessive financial contribution of Schwytz, who was to pay three-quarters of the total expense of 1.6 million francs. The question may be asked whether they were just reacting instinctively, or whether they had reflected on the case at issue, and weighed the pros and cons of spending more than the other parties in this school-enlargement project? Surely, the members of the Cantonal Council, as elected citizens having the interest of their canton at heart and who, by their responsibility, are bound to understand the problem at hand in all its aspects, can be trusted in their judgment? They are elected and payed with public money precisely to study and have a competent judgment on the technical issues facing the canton. Should the judgment of laymen be any better? In all fairness, it must be pointed out that voters get voluminous brochures from their local authorities before some important votations, so that, if they take the trouble to read them, they know precisely what they are voting for and can pretend to have a competent judgment. Still, is this not a rather strenuous effort at attempting to save direct democracy in circumstances which have made it technically difficult?

Issues of a technical nature can really have a living meaning in small communes only. There, a new parish hall, a displaced barn, a hedged field or a newly paved rural track will actually change the villagers' lives. In a big city, technical issues will of necessity be both more specialised and far away. The size of the city will make the specific problems geographically more distant and its vast population will dilute that community spirit which makes that, what concerns the town concerns all its inhabitants. But there's the rub, a vast city has "inhabitants" whereas a small commune has "members". The ideal of Swiss democracy is to treat every citizen as a "member" of a commune. This ideal is difficult to live by because what was originally a rural country has become a highly industrial and urban country, living in conditions which tend to break up the possibility of a living "membership" to any sort of community. In developed countries, everybody is supposed to specialise in a particular trade or skill. This applies to governing: the country is of necessity run by technocrats — urbanists, jurists, economists, sociologists — and, in a way, voters are tempted to push back decisions to those who, they believe, ought to do the job.

There are matters which, although technical in their execution, are vital in citizens' relation to everyday life. Town-planners might decide that a park should be sacrificed to a motor-

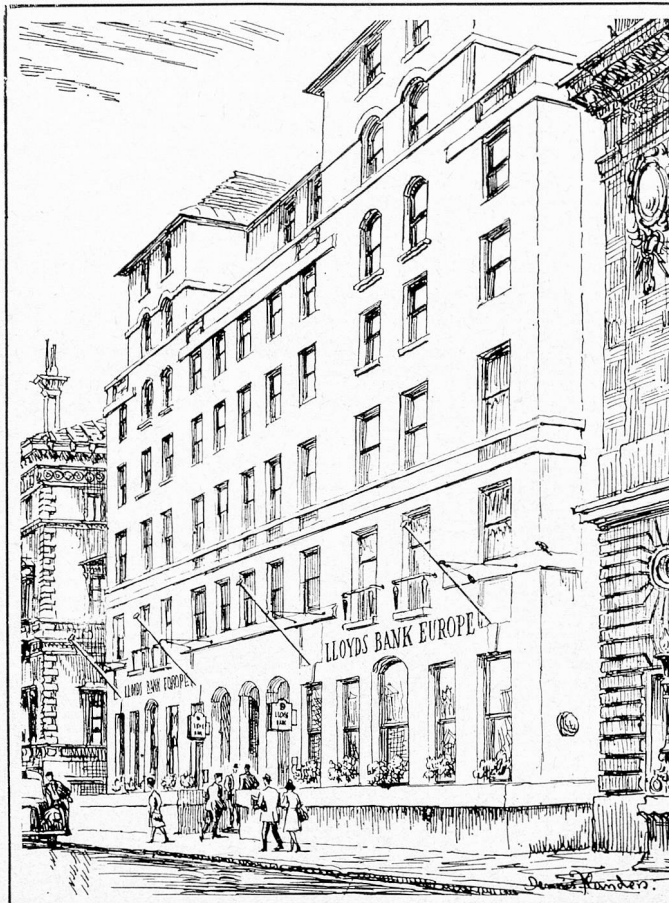
way, but the final word is asked of the people. This is an issue where the town council is in no way more competent than the population, in fact, it is not even a matter of competence. Nobody disputes the soundness of the town-planners' arguments: a motorway through that park will definitely streamline the traffic. The electorate is asked to vote on an issue which will affect the quality of their lives, a vote on principles. Do they prefer streamlining traffic in their town and temporarily eradicating traffic jams but no longer enjoy a square of green and quiet, or will they rather put up with the present situation and save their park? The issue is really a question of taste and lies not in the preserve of the specialist. Pragmatists will probably sacrifice the park and nature-lovers will save it. The important point is to give the possibility of choosing to both. In the same way, voting for funds designed to increase the local museum's collection also implies a choice which a specialist or a member of the town council is no more habilitated to take than the ordinary citizen. Deciding whether public money ought to be devoted to the acquisition of pictures or, say, the construction of a clinic for the mentally handicapped is purely a matter of personal appreciation. It is for such matters that the citizen's right of say must be protected. On the other hand, asking the man-in-the-

street whether a given public building ought to be sited in a particular place, or whether so much money could be allocated to the construction of a bridge is a mistake, because there are "yes" and "no" answers to these questions, and they can be correctly arrived at by competent people only. Let us then agree that, what the specialists can decide for themselves, the voters may be spared.

Owing to the growing size of Swiss cities, it is difficult to entertain Swiss democratic ideals, embodied in popular suffrage. This is especially true of the actual voting procedure which has become more of an insipid formality than anything else for many people. Those coloured slips with their questions and their "yes" or "no" squares, printed in thousands and sent by mail to thousands by an anonymous local authority, are the token of the citizens fundamental rights. It is certainly a pity that they are considered by many as vulgar forms! Owing to the separation of labour inherent to a massive urban society, the voter loses the belief that he is actually taking part in the decision-making process. He doesn't decide on which questions are to be debated. This is done behind his back, and so is the vital work of delimiting the problem. He doesn't go to the polls of his own initiative, he is called by local authorities (the same that have been bothering him about his tax returns...) which

means that he inevitably tends to become a "passive" voter. He is "told" to go and vote, he is presented with a voting slip to fill by an inevitable bureaucracy and has the feeling of being a figurehead whose voice is sought as some kind of representative formality. The modernity and concentration of Swiss society has forced on its members to dissociate themselves from those who lead it: in Swiss democracy, *everybody* governs his commune, but the citizen does not realise this. He has the right to say "*we* decide" and he has begun to say "*they* decide", meaning those civil servants and "other" responsible citizens.

The whole problem of Swiss absenteeism ought to be considered in its sociological context, which is characterised by a remarkable degree of contentment and social peace. No one will deny that Switzerland is a materially happy country. There are no strikes. There is no unemployment. There is plenty of prosperity, a beautiful environment, opportunities for all, and many other blessings. What problems we have, such as the Jura, overheating of the economy, old-age pensions, foreign labour etc. do not disturb a happy climate of general contentment, — so what have we got to vote about?... There is an understandable feeling, that everything going well, nothing need really be improved by going to the polls. The country gives to most what they want,



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therefore it is well run and there is no vital need to make one's individual voice heard.

Another important development is the transformation of Swiss patriotism. Just as in Great Britain, there has been a loosening of the sense of the old values, including the cult of the fatherland, among the younger Swiss. In a minority of cases, this has been a negative attitude, left unreplaced by anything constructive, but in general it has meant that people have been more interested in what is happening in the outside world. They might not bother voting on the price of milk but would insist on having their say on the problem of Switzerland's adhesion to the U.N.

Industrialisation, urbanisation, mass medias and competition, specialisation, competition and all that characterizes our modern way of life has had a subtle influence on the voting behaviour of the Swiss. It has tended to deaden their sense of civic responsibilities, or, at least, the feeling that voting was one of those responsibilities.

Many of our leading citizens are appalled by this situation. I wonder whether we should be as apprehensive as they are. After all, this is the natural outcome of definite causes. One cannot expect people not to behave differently under changing circumstances, and this applies to the simple act of going to the polls. Present sociological circumstances are such that direct democracy, as it was traditionally conceived in Switzerland, has lost a great deal of its freshness.

Another aspect which I have omitted to mention is that people's education, or at any rate their brains' capacities, have not increased at the same rate as the volume of technicality and general knowledge necessary to grasp some of today's new legislation. The last two federal votations were, after all, of a highly technical nature and required of the voter a good deal of preliminary study. What does the "statute of the Lausanne Polytechnic" mean without prior investigation, and what is the full bearing of a constitutional amendment on land development when this is a strange notion, whose meaning to the economy escapes many a layman. As government and legislation get more complicated, voters have to be more educated and better informed; they should devote a fixed fraction of their time in studying the underlying problems of their country. Unfortunately, the fact that a lot of time is spent nowadays in taking in information fits more often than not in a general drive towards entertainment. The amount of work and entertainment that distract the common citizen is another factor explaining his absence at the polls.

One reason why we shouldn't be pessimistic in front of this situation however is that the Swiss are broadly

and fully represented both on the cantonal and the federal level. Another is that, when the country will begin not satisfying all they want, they will wake up and express their discontent at the polls. In the meanwhile, votations on all levels are to go on, with their often pathetic attendance. One way to improve this is to submit live issues only to electors. But there should be no question of doing away with the system, all citizens would stand up if this were attempted. Such a venture would deface Switzerland, which would become another country!

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## SWISS NEWS

### A COMMITTEE AGAINST SWITZERLAND'S ADHESION TO THE NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY HAS BEEN CREATED

An action committee aiming at preventing Swiss adhesion to the world nuclear non-proliferation treaty has been set up in Zurich and has 62 members coming from political, journalistic, economic and military life. Among them, one finds national councillors R. Etter and H. R. Meyer, president of the city of Lucern, State councillor W. Jauslin, army corps commander Gygli, professors Grossman of Zurich and Wuhrman of Winterthur and the industrialist Max Schmidheiny.

In a declaration, the committee has expressed its satisfaction at the efforts undertaken to limit the number of nuclear weapons. "It approves all efforts which can lead to a reduction of the use of such weapons, but the non-proliferation treaty makes for two categories of states. Nuclear powers, two of them (France and China) not even adhering to the treaty, which are free to keep their immense stocks of nuclear weapons and even augment and perfect them. They are authorised to pursue underground atomic tests. On the other hand, non-nuclear countries, which comprise the immense majority of nations, have to renounce all such weaponry and must submit to numerous commitments". The committee specified that "in asking Switzerland to forego its adhesion to the treaty, the committee meant in no way to see Switzerland equipped with nuclear weapons. But the treaty is concluded for 25 years and there are practically no ways of denouncing it nor of revising it. Non-nuclear countries, due to this fact, are at the mercy of nuclear powers for twenty-five years. In addition to the political and security shortcomings of the treaty,

the reasons commanding a Swiss abstention are of economic order in the first place. There is the danger that nuclear powers interpret a non-proliferation treaty in their favour, which could result in serious disadvantages for the research efforts and the economy of non-nuclear countries. Moreover, an arbitration procedure to sanction defaulting countries, claimed by the Federal Council, is lacking completely".

The committee concludes by stating: "A Swiss adhesion can only be envisaged when concrete agreement will have been reached between Soviet Russian and the United States, when the interpretation of the economic meaning of the treaty will have been clarified and when the International Tribunal's rôle on settling differences of interpretation will have been defined".

The committee further underlines that any eventual Swiss adhesion ought to be submitted to an optional referendum. This would only be giving respect to the will of the people, who have already twice expressed their desire to keep Swiss freedom of action in this field.

(A.T.S.)

### ANTI-FOREIGNER LAW 'UNTHINKABLE'

#### —SAYS THE GOVERNMENT

After long discussions, the Government is officially recommending to Parliament and the electorate the rejection of the "over-foreignization" initiative which calls for measures to prevent the foreign population of any canton, except Geneva, exceeding 10% of the Swiss inhabitants.

The Government's emphatic rejection—which was already foreshadowed by blunt comments from various Cabinet Ministers—is based on economic, political and humanitarian motives.

Along with employers, the Government is convinced that the provisions of the initiative would cripple the economy.

It argues that the initiative's object would be defeated because many firms would have to reduce activities or even shut down, throwing Swiss citizens out of work.

Politically, the Government wants to stress that it would be difficult to carry out the terms of the initiative. These could not be applied to the large numbers of foreigners with permanent residence permits because the granting of these permits is the subject of agreements with other countries.

The Government regards it as unthinkable that international obligations should be broken. Also, if measures were taken against permanent foreign residents, Swiss residing abroad would be exposed to reprisals.