

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1970)
Heft: 1602

Rubrik: Comment

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COMMENT SWISS NEWS

THE INITIATIVE THAT FAILED

The most controversial issue to be submitted to the Swiss people's examination during the last weekend of September was an initiative seeking to inscribe in the Constitution the fundamental right of citizens to have a roof over their heads. This initiative was rejected by a fairly strong majority, although the main towns accepted it. This result was natural enough as the shortage of housing is more acutely felt in urban areas than in provincial cantons.

This "right to lodgings" initiative was abundantly debated in the Swiss press before the 27th September vote and, apart from an editorial found in the Swiss Mercantile Society's central organ, all papers that I have chanced to see were against the initiative and its implications.

The shortage of housing is one of the most pressing problems in Switzerland. Although 60,000 new flats and houses were completed last year, a fair figure, many people in the lower wage groups still have difficulty in finding appropriate accommodation at acceptable rent. The average Swiss spends a higher proportion of his income on housing than the people of most other developed countries. A constitutional initiative that purported to do something about the situation had therefore every chance of arousing interest and support. But the idea of implicating the constitution in a practical problem due to the economic conjuncture of the moment was equivocal. By adding an article providing for the "right" of every citizen to be adequately housed, the voter was left wondering whether the initiative only wanted to inscribe an obvious principle in the book of rules of the nation, or whether the Confederation was thereby given permission to make sure that this right was effectively assured to all. This would have meant such measures as appropriations of unused houses—and the spectre of stage totalitarianism was soon raised by the opponents of the initiative.

But the argument revolved upon economic considerations. So far, the Confederation has not helped housing otherwise than by special grants. Local authorities do not build entire housing estates in the same way as they do in England, and the state has made a point of not interfering with the supply and the economics of housing. The proponents of the initiative wanted to see the Confederation take control of the market situation and maintain rents at acceptable levels by its own enlarged means. The assumptions on which these desires rested were that the Confederation could effectively keep housing prices down and put a clamp on speculation. The mechanisms of a liberal

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UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN GENEVA?

Will the United Nations assembly be removed from its towering glass palazzo on Hudson River to the more inviting setting of the Palais des Nations in Geneva? Many delegates in New York have been asking this question because New York is reputedly not an easy town to live in. Afro-Asian delegates are ruffled by local racial discrimination and have to pay the exorbitant rents of down-town accommodation. The information which comes to them and on which they must rely for their working sessions is relayed through the American Television network. New York also has a maddening rhythm of life and even the cleaner and more policed parts of this outgrown metropolis offer only relative physical safety.

Jean Ziegler, Socialist national councillor for Geneva, discussed this possibility in the *Tribune de Genève*. He noted that a trans-Atlantic transfer of future general assemblies, although appreciated by many countries would have a weighty disadvantage. It would prompt the American Government to whittle down its financial contribution to the United Nations. The Americans supply a lion's share of present UN funds and the Senate would certainly react strongly if the most meaningful political function of the United Nations were to be staged elsewhere than in New York. The recent American decision to cut funds to the International Labour Organisation on the grounds that one of its new directors was a Russian can be taken as a warning of things that could come.

Berne has not so far made any hints to the American Government that it would be prepared to invite future UN assemblies. Elementary rules of tact had to be respected. But if major UN functions were actually to seek a site in Europe, then the Swiss Government would campaign in favour of Geneva. Switzerland's advantage in playing host to so many international organisations are not always obvious. Shopkeepers and hoteliers may naturally welcome this surge of international diplomatic nomads, but the ordinary wage earner has more to lose than to gain. The gilt salaries paid in international organisations contribute to raise the cost of living. The moneyed international executives are able to afford the better flats and leave many compatriots unsatisfied with the accommodation they can find. Swiss taxpayers have paid some 250 million francs between 1960 and 1970 to finance the enlargement and erection of international buildings. The Confederation allocates a special grant of 30 million francs to