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COMMENT

A HIGHLY ADAPTABLE PARTY SYSTEM

The news that two parties have merged in the Canton of Lucerne must sound strange on this side of the channel. Imagine each English county having a number of separate political parties, or the Conservative and Labour Parties deciding to merge into one single party.

The Swiss political system has a great number of parties, so that if two of them decide to merge in a particular canton, there are still plenty of them elsewhere. But in spite of her multiple-party system, Switzerland cannot be compared to countries such as France, which also has far more parties than the British and the Americans.

The difference is due, of course, to the fact that the Swiss State is a decentralised Confederation consisting of 22 autonomous states. Political parties therefore act on the local level before reaching out on the federal plane.

There are a number of historical and well established parties represented throughout the country. To name them, these are the Radical-Democratic Party, which held the absolute majority in Parliament until the introduction of the proportional system of election for the National Council in 1919, the Conservative and Christian-Social Parties, and the Social-Democratic Party. The first has been compared to the American Republican party (in spite of its "Democratic" description) because it stood for liberalism and tended to be identified with the propertied class. The party was at one time more progressive than it is today. The Conservatives are Catholic in their majority, federalistic,

and naturally have a conservative attitude. The Christian-Social and Social-Democratic Parties both represent Swiss Socialism. The first bases its action on the social teaching of the church, the second is more closely allied to the working-classes and has adopted the Marxist principles of class-war and even revolution in times past (more especially after the First World War).

Some parties are confined to one or two cantons. The Liberal-Conservatives, for example, are restricted to a few Protestant cantons. The Democrats mainly to Zurich and the Grisons. The Agrarian Party, which stands for the interests of peasantry, is more widespread. The Communists, who now call themselves the Labour Party, have increased their following at the end of the Second World War, but their success in the stable political conditions of Switzerland is very small. A recent development was the creation of the Independent Alliance Party, which stands for the consumers.

Other parties are limited to just one canton or city and may not even have a voice in Parliament. Examples are the extreme-right "Vigilant" party in Geneva, the extreme-left "Maoist" party in Ticino, the anti-foreigner "Liberal" party of Zurich, the "third-force" party of Jura. It is probably hardly any more difficult to create a political party in Switzerland than it is to found a company.

In a book on the "Parteien in der Schweiz", the Bernese sociologist E. Gruner defines a political party as "a political organisation gathering, either by ideological affinity or by community of interests, those who would like to have an influence on the will of the people". This is a very broad definition, but entirely applicable to Switzerland. Any group of citizens feeling the same way on a particular political question can unite and form a party whose aim will be to attract the interest of the voters and influence the making of decisions on the local, cantonal or federal levels either by having its members elected to responsible political positions or by canvassing a particular cause.

Dr. Gruner's definition of a party is too general to be applied to the anglo-saxon two-or-three party system. It is hard to picture a body of young citizens who, disagreeing with the Liberal, the Labour, the Communist and the Conservative Parties, decide to create a new party on the spur of the moment. The ruling parties are so well established (one could almost say "constitutional") that they could not be considered as bare associations grouping common interests. This is what some of the Swiss parties are. Some of them, like the Agrarian Party, are little different from professional associations and the Independent Parties (such as the "Migros" party) which support the consumer, are glorified consumers' associations.

(PMB)

SWISS NEWS

FEDERAL

The National Council in favour of student demand

Switzerland had traditionally one institution of higher technical and scientific education, the "Polytechnic" of Zurich. This school stood apart from the universities, which were under the care of the cantons. The technical faculties of the University of Lausanne, called the "Ecole Polytechnique de l'Université de Lausanne" had served for a long time as a polytechnic school to French-speaking Switzerland, but it was not federally-backed and did not enjoy equality of treatment with the Zurich school. Parliament, having decided that it was time for the two institutions to be considered as equivalent, voted a new law which put both of the schools at par. In October of last year, the students filed their first initiative to block this law, which, they thought, did not provide adequately in the way of student government. The Federal Council has now submitted an interim arrangement, valid for five years, during which an appropriate legislation will be devised. The submitted arrangement has been accepted by the National Council's educational commission. The students get some satisfaction in being given the right to voice their opinions at the working-assemblies of their schools. The way is also to be cleared for the future merger of the two polytechnics.

New travel facilities to the US

It will be easier for a category of Swiss businessmen to travel to the United States. The American authorities will in future deliver a so-called "treaty-investor-visa" to Swiss investors in the US and Swiss citizens interested in investing there. Employees of Swiss firms with subsidiaries in the US will also benefit from the new facility, so will their families. This new visa is renewable annually and ends the necessity of applying for an immigrant's visa.

Agreement with Lichtenstein

Mr. Willy Spühler, out-going head of the Political Department, has signed a convention with Count Mario Ledebur, chargé d'affaires of the Principality of Lichtenstein, making legal decisions (related to civil law or arbitration) binding in both countries, whether they are made in Switzerland or in Lichtenstein. This will help to develop commercial relations between the two states (who form one custom's union) and deepen their neighbourly relations.

Switzerland and hijacking

Switzerland has signed an international treaty which binds every nation to adopt a common attitude in the face of a new problem — the hijacking of airliners. The treaty stipu-