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COMMENT

THE PROBLEM OF SEASONALS

According to the 1970 census, Switzerland had a population of 6,270,000 inhabitants on 31st December, 1970, 5,190,000 of whom were Swiss and 1,080,000 aliens. Switzerland's population had increased by 840,000 inhabitants since the 1960 census, of which 500,000 were foreign. This latter figure represents the sum of 360,000 new immigrants, 220,000 children born of foreigners and 40,000 due to foreign naturalisations as a result of marriage to non-Swiss citizens.

The statistics gathered during the 1970 census also showed that the increase of the foreign element was the strongest among children below 14 years of age and the 20-39 age group.

Thus the alien population in Switzerland has soared from 11 per cent to 17 per cent of the total in ten years. This development, in view of its human and social consequences, gives some grounds to those who claim stiffer immigration measures. Mr. Schwarzenbach, their principal spokesman, intentionally omitted to include a highly important category of foreigners in his June 1970 package demanding the reduction to 10 per cent of the proportion of foreigners in Switzerland.

These were the "seasonal workers" holders of an "A" working permit and compelled to return home for a set period every year. Another official category of foreign workers, the "B" permit holders, who are entitled to remain in Switzerland for a year, following which his permit can be renewed. After 18 months of continued presence in Switzerland, he may apply for the "C" permit and reside in Switzerland for an unlimited period. "B" and "C" permit holders may bring in their families and enjoy similar housing facilities as the Swiss. Since 1970, their arrivals have been submitted to very strict quotas and their effectives have been stabilised. The number of seasonals, on the other hand, has increased from 152,000 in 1970 to 182,000 in 1971, which is very nearly what Mr. Schwarzenbach and his followers had hoped for.

Seasonal workers offer considerable economic advantages. They may not use the flats urgently required by a tight housing market, and usually live in dormitories, hotels and houses due for demolition. They are not allowed to bring in their families, which means that their presence is no burden to Swiss schools and hospitals. They pay taxes, which is good for the coffers of the State, but send all their extra money abroad, which is equally advantageous, as it limits inflation. Coming in the main from the most backward areas of Mediterranean countries, they are entrusted with the

most menial jobs. Deprived of family life and being cut off from the local population, they tend to congregate together in cramped cafes and cheap alehouses. Occasionally a married "A" permit couple bring in their children illegally and have to hide them from the authorities. A recent enquiry has tended to show that the output and quality of work of seasonals in industry has suffered from the miserable physical and mental conditions in which they often live.

In 1970, Schwarzenbach wanted to expatriate several hundred thousand foreign residents and compensate for this loss of work force by importing more seasonals. He was in fact promoting the kind of labour contract system in force in South Africa. It was a sad reflection on the degree of moral awareness of Swiss voters that 46 per cent of them should have backed such a proposal in June 1970.

There are far too many foreigners in Switzerland, yet they are so badly needed. This dilemma has lasted for the past ten years. The Churches and humanitarian circles of Switzerland all claim an end of the "A" permit system. The Federal Council has gone some way to meet their demands by authorising some 8,000 seasonals to apply for the "B" permit. The situation is not easy because, in our particular civilisation, the claims of prosperity also have to be met. This means that Switzerland cannot dispense overnight with 180,000 seasonals. On the other hand, concern over the effects of so many foreigners on Switzerland and its institutions are entirely justified.

Having a right to their own personality and traditions, there is no reason to expect that a million foreigners will become model Swiss citizens. This may produce a new consensus, a new amalgam. It is more likely to lead in the long run to social tensions, to a weakening of the fabric of Swiss life and a dulling of the ideals that have made Switzerland what it is.

However one may speculate on the future of a society in which a sixth of its members are different in mentality and tradition from the remainder, it appears desirable that this proportion should not be exceeded. Not from considerations on an "overheated economy" (which may not last for much longer) but for sociological common sense. It was right therefore to put quotas on new arrivals of regular residents. On humanitarian grounds it seems just as right to grant seasonal workers "B" permits or, at least, the right of enjoying the presence of their families.

It is no argument to say that "nothing compels these people to come to Switzerland" because the poverty prevailing in their country has forced them to leave their families, their sun and their way of life. Secondly, they are becoming increasingly vital to the economy and this fact should be reflected in the treatment allotted to them. It should also be noted that foreign workers are getting increasingly restless and, although they are backed in principle by Swiss unions, have tended to be responsible for the few strikes that occur in Swiss factories. It is important therefore to forestall any deterioration of industrial relations.

A BBC film on the transfer of labour in Europe screened last year gave a rather appalling idea of Swiss official morality. It even produced one or two harsh anti-Swiss letters addressed to "The Swiss Observer" by non-subscribers. They only had a half picture of the truth because, after all, seasonals only account for a fifth of the foreign population—which is generally happy in Switzerland. Yet the problem of seasonals remains. It could be solved at the cost of allowing in some 200,000 dependants and stepping up the building of cheap housing. Their service to the country is worth it.

(PMB)

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