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COMMENT HOW RELEVANT IS A YOUTH POLICY?

After a four-hour debate last September, the Council of States decided to entrust the Federal Council with working out proposals for a "Civil Service" in which conscientious objectors could be enrolled. The National Council has already opted for the same solution despite the recommendations of Parliament's Military Commission, which had decided against any alteration of Article 18 of the Federal Council. This Article states that "Every Swiss man is held to national service".

The idea of a Civil Service had first been launched by a group of teachers from Muenchenstein (Basle) in an initiative which had received wide popular support. This initiative will however not be used but the Government will base its draft bill on the suggestions of the Muenchenstein Committee. The proposed Civil Service must not be confused with another scheme, which is in a far more advanced stage, allowing volunteers to enrol in an international civil and humanitarian force which could be sent in disaster areas around the world.

The new bill will of course require a Referendum because amendment to the Constitution is involved. It is quite an important amendment as compulsory military service has traditionally been considered as a fundamental duty of every citizen — as the tribute paid by every Swiss for the right of living in the security of a neutral country.

Details of the new bill have not yet been worked out. They will necessarily be complex. So far, young men refusing to serve for political and moral reasons have been considered as "criminals" in as much as they refuse to abide by the rules of Society. The law calls every able man to serve. Refusal to do so can only be described as breaking the law in the present state of legislation. Switzerland is one of the few countries which does not give conscientious objectors a special

status distinguishing them from law-breakers. As yet, conscientious objectors have to defend their case before the courts and are usually sentenced to a spell of hard labour.

Parliament has decided to change this. Conscientious objectors should no longer be regarded as criminals and will be offered an alternative. The problem will be to define criteria distinguishing between various types of conscientious objection. A man that would not refuse to serve under another political regime is obviously a doubtful conscientious objector. Refusing to serve for political reasons is equivalent to a blunt rejection of the present order of things and poses philosophical problems to the law-makers, who will doubtless have to rely on the vast body of case-law already available. Moral and Religious objection is more acceptable since it is more general and involves a refusal to hold and use weapons of death under any circumstances.

It will be necessary to make the alternate civil service as demanding if not more, than normal military service in order to stem a possible flood of would-be conscientious objectors. Whatever one thinks of the Swiss Army's credibility, it is there to stay until the people decide otherwise and cannot be deprived of thousands of serviceable men suddenly finding themselves a pacifist calling.

Religious conscientious objectors should indeed be given a special status and allowed to serve the community in some other way than by taking part in drills and field exercises. There are in fact rather few of them and their number has not risen over the years whereas political objectors have become more and more numerous. But political objectors should pay the penalty asked of those breaking the law in the interest of the country and community who depend on that law for their survival. Destroying military service

— an arguably valid aim — can only be achieved by people showing an example by their sacrifice. When thousands of young people will be breaking stones in hard-labour detention centres, then Swiss public might be moved into reconsidering the relevance of national service. For the time being, the majority still believe that national service is an essential institution of our democracy. The will of this majority should be respected and it is natural that those who defy it should pay a price.

While Parliament agreed to consider a military-exemption legislation, three National Councillors asked the Government to consider apparently contradictory proposals providing for women's military service. Two parliamentarians asked for a voluntary service, and a third for a compulsory one. The Federal Council replied that it would accept these proposals as long as they were not binding and asked the M.P. who had called for obligatory service to alter the form of his request from that of a private members bill (motion) to a question ("postulate"). The Government stressed that women military service presented many problems which would take time to settle.

The fact some M.P.'s are asking for women to serve when conscientious objection is on the order of the day shows how concerned many Swiss are over the future of national defence.

HOME NEWS

VOTING IN THE COUNTRY

Sunday 23rd of September was a voting day in many parts of Switzerland. Several cantons had to settle issues pending for a long time. Some of them, namely Geneva and the Valais, stood out by their high absenteeism. Only 9 per cent of Genevese bothered (a) to transfer the city's gas and electricity services to the Canton and (b) to accept the naturalisation of foreign adopted children. These issues were arguably not of the kind to change the course of history and didn't give rise to much local concern. In the Valais, only 12 per cent of the electorate went to the polls. A great majority of them turned down proposals to transform the "obligatory" referendum into an "optional" referendum. This means that the people did not like the idea of being called to the polls for administrative matters only when 4 per cent of the electorate (6000