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# The Swiss Observer

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## COMMENT

### CONTROVERSY OVER INLAND WATERWAYS

Parliament began its Spring Session with a stormy debate on the future of inland navigation in Switzerland. The issue at stake was to extend the navigable stretches of the Rhine upstream of Basle up to the meeting-point of the Rhine and the Aar, to carry out works on the latter so as to allow barges to be hauled into the Lake of Biel and thence into Lake Neuchatel and up to Yverdon. The project would link the western and French-speaking part of Switzerland with Rotterdam and the North Sea, and would facilitate the economic development of these less industrialised areas.

Over thirty members of the National Council rose to state their position on this controversial and age-old subject. The great majority of the representatives from Western Switzerland were in favour, but there was strong opposition from the Labour (Communist) and Socialist delegates. All the left-wing elements fought the project, and so did the extreme right, among them Schwarzenbach's Independent Republicans. The extreme left and extreme right in Switzerland both stand for the workers but harp on two different sensitive areas of working-class consciousness. The extreme left takes exception to the material inequalities of capitalism whereas the extreme right is incensed by the large number of foreigners. The existence of financial iniquities and of an excessive number of "Gastarbeiter" can both be pegged at big business. The planned trans-helvetian canal will after all serve the interests of big business — a fact which constitutes their principle motivation.

On the other hand, the liberal and conservative parties are generally in favour of developing the upper Rhine's navigability. There is some objection from some cantons bordering the Rhine and the Aar. The Canton of Aarau appears to the most vocal among them.

The debate took place against a background of growing environmental concern, an issue which is as serious in

Switzerland as anywhere else. It is a well-known fact that Switzerland's usable space, the *Plateau*, is populated to one of the highest densities in the world. Valleys are crammed with railway lines, highways, factories and houses leaving very little space for nature and intensively-farmed land. The problem of "Vital Space" is a very real one in a country in whose lakes of legendary beauty it is often no longer possible to swim.

The argument was carried on every platform. The conservationists, led by "Aqua Viva" an influential organisation, claimed that extending the navigable stretches of the Rhine and the Aar would pollute the whole of Switzerland's inland waterways. They raised the frightening picture of tankers colliding and spilling thousands of tons of crude oil in our lakes and rivers, killing off their fish populations. They also predicted that vast new industrial estates would sprout from the green and marshy banks of the Thiele and Aar totally disfiguring our natural heritage in the name of a philosophy of reckless profit-making and inconsiderate progress whose futility has long been proved" (Aqua Viva statement). Finally, they put forward the argument that the cost of developing Swiss rivers as navigable waterways would never pay and involve a wasteful duplication of the already existing railway network.

The supporters of the scheme retaliate on every point. They produce statistics for the Rhine and the Main showing that fewer than one incident leading to pollution occurs in these rivers every two years. They stress that boats no longer drain off their tanks in open waters. This is now carried out in ports by specialised firms equipped in consequence. They say that a large canal-tanker is less polluting and noisy than two 60-wagon trains or 60 road-tankers with trailers carrying the equivalent amount of oil. As another argument, they point out that extending the Swiss railway and road network in order to accommodate more traffic conduces to the daily disappearance of farms and pastures. Rivers already exist and dredging them would not use up more land.

The debate ended on a compromise: The Government will be given two more years to submit a definite bill on Inland Navigation and, more particularly, on the "Trans-Helvetian Canal", a century-old dream.

P.M.B.

# SWISS EVENTS

## The "Baslers" enjoy their Carnival

Every major Swiss city has its annual municipal celebrations. The most renowned of them all is the Basle Carnival — an event which many *Baslers* living overseas make a point of attending regularly. The Carnival is the highlight of the year for the city. It is launched on the Monday which comes after Shrove Tuesday. It thus began this year on 12th March. The Carnival gets moving before dawn — at 4 a.m. — this moment is called the *Morgestraich*. All at once, drum and fife bands are set in motion all over the town. Every street comes to life and the old alleys of the medieval centre of Basle are lit by torch-light processions. Literally tens of thousands of citizens with their children roam the streets and crowd in taverns (every one of them open) to enjoy thick meal soup and oignon cakes. They used to accompany this with hot chocolate, but now tend to prefer wine and beer. The cold prevailing in this early period of the year has not the slightest influence on tempering the enthusiasm and the merriment ruling over an event which is characteristic of a fun-loving population.

Appropriately so, Monday and the following Wednesday are official bank holidays entirely devoted to the Carnival. Basle forgets its conglomerates and factories during the three days from Monday to Wednesday. The Carnival takes precedence. The two main processions are held on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. Carriages often represent topical subjects close to the town. A flower-wagon carried the emblem "Adieux richesse, bonjour tristesse" — a reference to the departure from Basle — town of wealthy rate-payers. Another one celebrated the 450th Anniversary of the merger of the Commune of Riehen and Basle — an obvious reference to the fact that such a merger has not yet been achieved by the two half-cantons of Basle-Town and Basle-Land.

Between the two main processions, Baslers join in drum and fife-bands and walk along the cobbled streets of the old town, invading every tavern. Beer and wine flow freely and tills clang continuously to the joy of bar and restaurant-owners, who cash in more in those three days than they do in a month. Night clubs and dance halls are open all night. The whole place rings with Basler fun and Germanic gregariousness.

The Carnival is the first of any importance to be held in the year. It has been held the Monday after Shrove Tuesday ever since the Reformation, which seems to have broken the previous Catholic ruling preventing festivities after Shrove Tuesday. In the early days, Catholics used to assemble for Mass on