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ABOUT OUR CHANGE OF LAYOUT

Readers who already have experience of our Special Issues may be surprised to see that this present one uses two different typefaces and a different layout from the previous numbers. This is because the Political Department in Berne and the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad, who have supplied text for the first nineteen pages of this issue, have decided to send the same set of films for offset production to all the English-speaking

countries where the Special Issues are published. As it happens, the films are tailored to the format of existing Swiss publications in France, Belgium and elsewhere. This format is smaller than ours and the only way to compensate for this is by pushing the unwieldy headings which you see atop the pages coming from Berne. Hitherto, the layout of the Special Issues had been entrusted to us and the results of our efforts used in the Canadian Special Issues. Berne has since decided to rationalise and centralise. This Swiss efficiency is the reason for our change of appearance.

P.M.B.

Comment

SHOULD THE CONSTITUTION BE REVISED?

The Federal Constitution was adopted a hundred years ago on May 29th. This bulky document plays a fundamental role in Swiss life and is invoked even more often than the American Constitution in the United States. It is the charter that has enabled the Swiss Confederation to grow and develop through a century of troubled history and to become the country that it is today, enjoying a unique reputation in the world.

This document, which is a revised version of the 1848 Constitution which

laid down the foundations of modern Switzerland, has in its turn been due for revision for over five years. Opinions vary as to the need to revise this fundamental text, but a commission chaired by a former federal councillor, Mr. Fritz T. Wahlen, undertook to establish whether the Swiss people were in favour of a renewed constitution and if so, to ask them to give their views on the provisions and aims of a new draft. Originally it was expected that these answers would be available in time for the drafting of a new Constitution by the end of this year to mark the Centenary of the 1874 Constitution. This task, which is being carried further by a new working group of no less than 46 members headed by federal councillor Kurt Furgler, is now expected to take another four years.

The Wahlen Commission recorded the conclusions of its extensive enquiry among Cantons, political parties, churches, associations and individuals in an 860-page volume containing 22 chapters. The enquiry had been carried out mainly by means of a detailed questionnaire which was filled in by hundreds of Swiss citizens at home and abroad.

For all its thickness, this study proposes very little that is new. Perhaps the only important suggestions are to inscribe social rights into the Constitution. To the three immutable pillars consisting of federalism, democracy and individual freedom would be added the basic rights to work and

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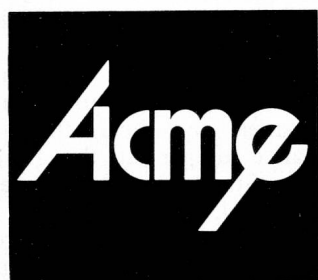
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housing. The Constitution would not only minister to the needs of human dignity but also to those of the body. The Report contains other suggestions aiming at ensuring that Switzerland's economic growth is harmonious and maintained with stable prices and a balanced foreign trade. To this end, the majority of answers are favourable to statutory worker participation in management and to increased state planning.

Another idea which appears in the report is for a public register of links which members of Parliament might have with interest groups. Although this device appears similar to the register of interests recently instituted for MPs in the Commons, its prime object would not be to fight corruption, but to prevent the setting-up of parliamentary commissions with members tied to similar groups of interests and thus arriving at the same decisions.

All the major aspects of Switzerland's institutional life are covered with practically no modification in regard to the structure and attributions of Parliament, and the Federal Council. The Wahlen Commission admits, with scepticism, that the government could have more than its present seven members but makes no firm recommendations it thus reflects the lack of strong opinion of the Swiss on this often discussed issue.

There should be a fairer deal for conscientious objectors who could serve with a civil organisation. Switzerland's Army should remain a militia army. Independence should not be considered as an absolute concept and the Constitution should recognise that, while neutrality must be kept, Switzerland increasingly depends on the outside world. But the report warns that this dependence must be prevented from becoming excessive.

It can therefore be seen that the results of about five years labour by a team of important personalities hasn't shown a particularly strong desire by the Swiss for a change of their Constitution and hasn't yielded particularly new results. It appears to offer no solution regarding membership to the United Nations and the way in which the electorate should participate in foreign policy-making.

Adding articles on the right to work and the right to a decent home is really more appealing than meaningful. In no way can these rights be absolute. They could conceivably be absolute in a perfect Communist state where social considerations take precedence over all economic ones. But there is no hint in the Wahlen Report about a switch to a Communist constitution. The provisions regarding individual freedom are tailored to the needs of a liberal and market economy in which a certain degree of unemployment is inevitable. Those who answered the questionnaire wished Switzerland to expand economically. This automatically entails the development of new technology and the discarding of old methods, the requirements for new

skills, labour mobility, new demographic concentrations and with them housing problems and a host of social problems which cannot find an absolute answer. In Switzerland, the right to work is almost universally guaranteed today because of an exceptional economic situation. However, this right is not absolute in its application since it is not always possible, even in Switzerland, to find the kind of work one dreams of. The right to work cannot therefore be placed on the same level as the right to be free, and both rights are to some extent contradictory.

The results of the Wahlen enquiry thus show that there is no burning need to revise the Constitution and that the task of the new working commission headed by Mr. Furgler will be difficult for want of definite objectives. Although many authorities are known to urge a renewal of the Federal Constitution and a well known French-speaking journalist wrote recently that such an overhaul of the national rule book was even more necessary than in 1874 because of the "acceleration of history", it is hard to find a really strong case for a revision. One of the main criticisms is that the actual Constitution which has received countless adjunctions over the years as the results of referenda, is an untidy text.

Several articles have four or five separate sub-articles each with their own set of paragraphs. One has no less than seven such sub-articles. The Constitution is thus untidy and not logical. If there is a case for reordering it and rephrasing it, this is a legal clerk's work. It is a matter of handling propositions and not one of fundamental change.

There is indeed no need for fundamental alterations because no one wants Switzerland to be different. The principles of neutrality, federalism, individual freedom, democracy are there to stay and there is little scope for altering the obligations of citizens, communes and cantons towards the preservation of these institutions. Given this, any revision of the Constitution would essentially amount to a streamlining of the existing text. The 1874 revision was necessary because, twenty-five years after the creation of the modern Confederation, Switzerland was still in its infancy and working towards its nationhood. A hundred years later, Switzerland has become an "old" nation and a revision of the Constitution could not have the same bearing as in 1874.

P.M.B.

1974, A CENTENARY YEAR FOR THE COLONY

The Unione Ticinese is celebrating its Centenary this year. A hundred years of eventful history of a leading Swiss society in the United Kingdom was related in a booklet richly illustrated with photographs of by-gone days published by its Committee.

We are told that the Society was constituted on February 8th, 1874, as a mutual aid society by a group of well-meaning immigrants already resident and well established in the capital. Among the Swiss Cantons, the Tessin is probably the one that has brought the most immigrants abroad. A great many came to Britain where the origin of many famous restaurants and hotels are due to the initiative of Ticinese immigrants. Apart from the London restaurants, every major south coast town could boast of a Ticinese establishment. Hastings, Bognor, Bexhill, Worthing, Portsmouth, Southampton, Bournemouth, Folkestone, Margate, Chatham, Plymouth all have, or had, restaurants run by Ticinese families. The last of these to close was the Albertoli Restaurant in Portsmouth, a well known meeting place of actors and celebrities, due to a redevelopment of the centre of Portsmouth.

An important immigration to London during the latter half of the nineteenth century had thus led to a need for giving residents of Ticinese origin an opportunity to meet and help each other in an organised way through this new

society, the Unione Ticinese, whose committee met for the first time on February 12th, 1874, at the house of the Brentini family at 100 The Strand.

That same year, on September 17th, we find an indication of the aims of the Society with the decision to send the sum of £10 to help the victims of the floods in the Tessin. This was the first of many such donations that were to be made by the Committee of the Society over the hundred years.

As early as 1875, after one year of existence, the Society began to celebrate its anniversaries and held the first commemorative dinner at the Pantan Hotel, Pantan Street, in the presence of the Swiss Consul. In 1878 began the purchase of graves in Kensal Green Cemetery as the Mutual Aid rules gave every member the right of burial in a Society grave. Through the years, many members found their last resting place in Kensal Green and as this became overcrowded, in St. Pancras Cemetery, Finchley.

While the Society was only open to men, the wives of members soon became involved in its activities when three of them, Mesdames Simona, Fascola and Gallizia, were commissioned to prepare a banner having on one side the Swiss flag and on the other the Ticinese flag with the motto "Uno per tutti, tutti per uno". Years later, the ladies formed their own section which was eventually merged with the Mother Society.

The choice of a regular meeting place posed a problem from the earliest days. Dinners were no problem since the Society had many members involved in