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Comment

THE MOST IMPORTANT ACTIVITY OF THE DAY

Consumer Protection being one of the rare subjects not covered by our wide-ranging Constitution, it is not surprising to learn that the Federal Council has recently submitted a draft article on the matter to the main economic and political organisations. We have to admit, however, that the contents of the draft are unknown to us. The idea of such an article was first raised by Mr. Hans Schaffner, former Head of the Department of Public Economy, in the days when Switzerland's war against economic overheat first had to be waged in earnest, in the early sixties.

Consumer protection was then viewed from an economic angle, as a means of fighting inflation. The buying urge can indeed override considerations of thrift in the face of our rampant inflation. Consumers may well complain against the rise in prices but pay up all the same whether the increases are justified or not. On the other hand, firms can conceivably use an inflationary situation to their advantage by using inflation as a cover for excessive increases. Protecting consumers can thus be viewed as one of the means of reducing their spending and hence stemming inflation.

However, as laws already exist in various fields on consumer protection, mainly the laws on restrictive practices, product quality, retail price maintenance and trades description, one wonders in what way the Constitution will add to this vast body of legislation. But by proposing to inscribe the matter in the Constitution, the Government is stating the fundamental importance of "consuming" in our ordinary lives and in our modern society. Since consumption of all kinds is perhaps our most important activity it deserves, all told, to be remembered by the Constitution.

But the Constitution should really contribute to *reduce* the importance of this activity, because consumers wouldn't need so much "protection" any more.

The importance of consumption is the result of those tremendous pressures

acting on men and women in our industrial society. Many of these pressures originate in the need for companies to sell their goods and hence foist them on their potential customers by an appetite-whetting publicity, which of course creates new consumer habits, new desires and new values. This is the law of our system.

Children are submitted to it very early on, and not only from television and street posters, but from their own parents' veneration for material things. The child's consumer mentality automatically develops along the path set by his parents. It is not only tied to acquisitiveness and the impulse to conserve, but also to competition. A child will for example envy his friend's better windcheater or the fact that his friend's parents have a tennis court in their garden. Comparisons of this nature are made at school and can develop, as they do in middle-class America, in a lamentable race for material one-upmanship where everything that is possessed — cars, cameras, spin-drier, antiques — is compared with the goods of the kind owned by one's friends and rivals or proposed in their latest versions by an invading publicity.

The future article should perhaps protect children against this sort of thing, otherwise they will find their only answer in revolt and marginal existence, a solution which we know is being chosen by an increasing number of disillusioned young people.

All this must be set in the worldwide context of an inevitable diminution of consumption and an increased sharing of the goods that will be available. In this respect, the Constitution should certainly have something to say after all.

P.M.B.

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SWISS EVENTS

FEDERAL

INTRODUCTION OF MEASURES TO STABILISE THE FOREIGN WORK-FORCE

New federal regulations on the numerical strength of the foreign labour force were enforced on August 1st. They are in line with previous regulations to steady the foreign population of Switzerland before the end of the seventies and aiming at a decline of this population thereafter. The main new element is found in the emphasis given to hospitals. The allocation of new manpower to individual cantons has been calculated following a different set of rules giving priority to hospitals and schools. Deliveries of annual residency permits are limited to 20,500 a year, 18,000 of which are distributed among cantons and 2,500 awarded to special or individual cases. The larger cantons have a greatly increased "intake" respecting the fact that their hospitals, for example, handle patients from neighbouring cantons. Thus Zurich's "quota" is increased from 2,808 to 3,172 new workers, Vaud's from 1,782 to 2,136 and Geneva's from 1,260 to 1,436.

Official figures indicate that the foreign resident manpower in Switzerland had increased by only 0.1 per cent during the 12 months to last April, showing that the Federal Council's stabilisation policy is succeeding. A high number of foreigners received permanent residency status for having lived for over ten years in Switzerland but this was offset by a sharp fall in yearly permit holders. There has, on the other hand, been a spectacular drop in the seasonal work force. It has been cut by 26,787 men and women, or 18.1 per cent during the period under consideration. This development is almost entirely due to the slump in the hotel and building industry.

The new combat plane: Swiss experts satisfied with the "Tiger"

The four Army test pilots sent to Williams Air Base in Arizona to test the Northrop F 11-5E Tiger jet fighter considered as the most likely replacement candidate to Switzerland's ancestral Venoms have returned home fully satisfied with the plane's performance. The pilots said they were convinced that the Tiger was adapted to the tasks planned for it by the Air Force and that no structural modifications would be required, such as the possibility of folding the wings to enable the machines to enter nuclear-proof alpine caverns. Two