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Comment

A DEMOCRATIC CHOICE

In little more than a month, the Swiss people will be invited to give their answer to the "Third Initiative" against what its promoters consider as the excessive number of foreigners in Switzerland.

This vote will be of crucial importance. It will be a repetition of the 7th June, 1970 Referendum in which proposals to repatriate some 40 per cent of foreigners were defeated by a narrow 54-46 majority.

The demands of the present initiative are similar but tougher. So much so, in fact, that Mr. James Schwarzenbach, who had launched the 1970 initiative, has dissociated himself from this one in the belief that it is going too far. Overtaken by his original National Action Movement, Mr. Schwarzenbach has, some time ago, joined the less extreme Republican right-wing formation.

Let us briefly recall what the vote will be about. The idea is to reduce the "alien" element among the people living in Switzerland. The present proportion of 16.7 per cent is considered as socially divisive and patriotically destructive by those who support the initiative, and who come from the same strata as the supporters of Mr. Enoch Powell in Britain. If the initiative goes through, about 350,000 foreign workers would have to leave Switzerland within three years. The total emigration would reach 520,000 people towards the end of 1977. Switzerland has at present a little more than a million resident foreigners on its soil. This forced repatriation would hit all foreigners except those working in hospitals or international organisations.

These proposals are truly staggering. If they are accepted, which God forbid, it would be the first time in history that people are massively repatriated as a result of a *democratic choice*.

One immediately thinks of the Ugandan precedent. Some 40,000 Asians were thrown out of their country following the decision of a man not generally singled out for the balance of his judgement. This expatriation has been

a decisive factor in turning a hitherto prosperous African economy into absolute shambles. This parallel cannot be extended to Switzerland entirely because those Ugandan Asians formed the professional elite of their country, while the foreigners which some Swiss are hoping to get rid of are the working and sweating backbone of their prosperity.

In a country suffering from a desperate labour shortage, they are just as essential as any "elite". But the figures are of a completely different order. Although they will be given more time to pack their bags than General Amin's stooges, there will be over *half a million* foreigners leaving a country that is only a quarter more populated than Uganda.

A moment's reflexion leaves one dumbfounded by the enormity of the issue and the fact that such a decision is seriously being considered by millions of electors. The Swiss Press has never failed during the past months to report the warnings of senior and informed citizens on the catastrophic effects of the proposals. One recent warning came from Professor F. Knescharek, a Saint-Gall don well known for his long term economic and population forecasts. He said that the Swiss economy would *collapse* if it were faced with massive repatriation of the manpower it just cannot do without. Hundreds of firms would be forced to operate at a fraction of their capacity. As this predicament would strike all industry, but at various degrees, the expected drop in production would be compounded with innumerable distortions and imbalances coupled with an accelerated wage inflation as companies scramble to attract the labour they can get. The scene would be set for a speedy end to Switzerland's short lived era as the most prosperous nation in the world.

Prosperity has, we all know, negative side-effects, particularly on the moral and spiritual sides of human existence. But the sponsors of the "Third Initiative" are not primarily interested in Switzerland's spiritual progress. Their intention is not to save moral values from a surfeit of consumption. They are as oblivious of these values as they are of economic realities. Their prime motivation lies in their pettiness and mistrust. This can't however serve as the basis of a sound decision.

A major concern of many people is how women will vote. This will be their first opportunity to take part in a referendum on the immigrant problem and some people think privately (but nothing seems to have been published along those lines in the Press) that women will vote emotionally in an issue which calls, more than ever, for cool judgement. Women have probably more dealings with foreigners than men, both in professional and domestic life.

Swiss watches, for example, are assembled in great part by foreign women. But causes for friction are likely to arise in such activities as shopping, fetching the children from school, walking in front of a neighbouring house which may have an untidy garden and a display of soiled linen.

To this must be added the reactions of Swiss women to foreign men. Italians and other hot-blooded nationals find it hard to learn that Swiss girls aren't necessarily like Swedish tourists on the Italian Riviera. Frustration is bound to exist in an essentially male seasonal population compelled to leave their families behind. The inevitable tensions arising from this situation move some categories of women into strong dislike of foreign male presence.

There is therefore a strong possibility that the initiative will be accepted, but a wrong decision of this kind would not, hopefully, be final. Once the consequences would no longer belong to the field of economic forecasting, but be felt in the working conditions, quality of life and wage-packets of the Swiss, it seems likely that a new initiative reversing the proposals of the Third Initiative would be launched soon enough. P.M.B.

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