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COMMENT

NO AGREEMENT ON ABORTION

At the end of a three-day debate in Early March, the National Council rejected proposals to reform the present law on abortion. The debate had been triggered by a highly-successful initiative calling for the unrestrained freedom to carry out abortions. The initiative, which was launched about two years ago by a Committee of Women, had been backed by well over sixty thousand signatures. As usual in the case of most initiatives, especially when they are controversial, the Government was prompted to work out counter-proposals which, once approved by Parliament, would eventually be submitted to the people and give them the opportunity to choose between these and the proposals set out in the original initiative.

In fact, citizens who decide to encourage a new law by drafting an Initiative often perform this exercise just to prod the Government into action. They withdraw it once the Government has met them half way. This however was not the case of the third Anti-Foreign Initiative whose terms were presented intact last October to the people. However, the Government's less radical counter-proposals carried the day.

On the issue of abortion, the debate was confused by the various counter-proposals which had been worked out by the Federal Council and a Special Parliamentary Commission. The Federal Council suggested that abortions should be legalised within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy under particular

individual and social circumstances. The majority of the Commission suggested that abortion should be free of all conditions during the twelve-week "safe" period, while a minority (beaten by one vote only) called for more stringent conditions than those recommended by the Government. The Commission was sharply divided on the issue. This division was reflected in the House with Christian Democrats, representing the Catholic Cantons, being expectedly less liberal in their outlook.

The three-day debate, which was the most important during Parliament's spring session, took place in three stages. The National Council first supported the Federal Council proposal against the more restrictive solution defended by the minority of the Commission. But the Christian Democrats headed by Mr. Alois Hurlimann (Zug) announced that the defeated proposals were the only ones which they could in all conscience support. The party thus abstained from a second vote which resulted in a two-to-one victory for the most liberal solution (12-week freedom of abortion) against the qualified solution recommended by the Government.

At this stage, a Liberal MP from Lausanne, Mr. Claude Bonnard, who had initially voted in favour of the more liberal solution, said that it was impossible, in view of the strong cantonal partisanship apparent in the debate, to institute a federal law which some cantons might accept and some others might hate. It was necessary to find a federalistic solution which would not violate the traditions and practices of individual Cantons.

Speaking for the Government, Mr. Ernst Brugger, Head of the Department of Public Economy, pleaded with Mr. Bonnard and said that it would be wrong for women in one Canton to have a different treatment from their fellow citizens in other Cantons.

But the federalism of Mr. Bonnard prevailed. As a result, the National Council was back to square one after a lengthy and arduous debate. The issue is on the Council of State's summer Agenda beginning in June, but a motion has already been drafted calling for a cancellation of the debate and a referral of the whole problem to the Federal Council. The issue appears rather confused at this stage because of the federalistic prepossessions of many MPs.

A way out might be found by means of a rather general federal law which would prescribe the individual liberties of Cantons to legislate on abortion. The present law which is contained in the Penal Code, is already applied differently by the different Cantons. It is much harder, for example, for women to get an abortion in a Catholic Canton like the Valais, than in Geneva or Zurich. At any rate, the present law is said to be infringed by no less than 15 cantons where illegal abortions are as widely carried out as in other countries that have not changed their laws.

When they heard of the outcome of the National Council debate, 300 women demonstrated in front of Parliament, telling MPs not to dither on the problem and adapt the new law to the realities of our times. Liberationists all over the country deplored Parliament's vote, but other categories of women, such as those grouped under the banner *Oui a la Vie* in Geneva, welcomed it. The division on abortion reflected differing philosophical positions whose geographical determinism became evident during the National Council debate. The Government tried to steer between the "for" and "against" poles and apparently satisfied no one. It will now have to pore over the same problem again. P. M. B.

NEW EDITOR

Readers will have noticed two advertisements for a new Editor at the end of last year. This publicity has definitely produced results and I understand that no fewer than 11 applications were received. From that number it was possible to find an adequate Editor as I am bowing out after holding the editorial chair since August 1969. He is Mr. Werner George Sommer, 35, a dual national of Swiss parentage who is currently a deputy Editor of a Rubber and Plastics Magazine.

Mr. Sommer will be taking over next month and I am sure that he will be giving us more details on his career in due course. Meanwhile, I should like to welcome him and wish him every success in his efforts to keep the *Swiss Observer* going. This is no small task for a part-timer, and Mr. Sommer can count on my understanding support. For this reason, I'll say that my ties to this publication are by no means cut and that I shall be delighted to send editorial contributions depending on our new Editor's requirements.

My reasons for leaving the *Swiss Observer* are essentially that I need more

time for other ventures. My main breadwinning occupation will be to remain on the French Desk at Reuters, Fleet Street, a job that I've kept for the past three-and-a-half years. May I express the wish that the subscribers to the *Swiss Observer* will support Mr. Sommer with the kindness and support so often shown to me. I certainly encourage them to renew their subscription. I myself look forward to reading a revamped *Swiss Observer* with good stories written by an English-speaking professional!

This is, therefore, not a farewell and I look forward to the opportunity of keeping contact through occasional contributions to the *Swiss Observer*. As far as I can see, I shall be living indefinitely in this good country to which I came in 1967. Britain is not as "comfy" as Switzerland — everybody knows this — but there are other compensations! Besides, with a recession and lay-offs in the Press everywhere life is no easier in Switzerland in this line of business. I am therefore condemned to be a Swiss ex-patriate at the ripe age of 32 — but I'm not complaining. I should like to end here by sending every reader my greetings and best wishes.

Pierre-Michel Béguin

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