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# THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

*The following commentary was published in the Journal de Genève. Its author laments that the Swiss are not going to the polls any more and suggests one reason why.*

Who is the holder of power? To this question, history books and civic instruction manuals all give the same answer: It is the people. Switzerland is a democracy. In fact, it is a model of democracy. A model because the people are not content with electing a Parliament and not satisfied with choosing those who will give the orders and take control. They have the right of referendum, of launching initiatives, of periodically expressing their positions on constitutional revisions, on new laws and decrees.

So the people hold power, the people are sovereign. But how is it, then, that they make so little use of the advantages which are offered to them? What a gap between the wealth of Switzerland's democratic institutions and the mild interest which the Swiss appear to have for them! Naturally, many votes are being held and they are getting more numerous all the time, but the participation of the electorate which was small from the start, is now becoming derisory. Since the end of the Second World War, and despite a few spurts of life, our democracy has been a democracy of abstentionism. The last vote on the Economic Article constituted a record in this field. Less than a quarter of the electorate deigned to drop a slip inside the voting box. When a victory or a defeat is obtained in this way, one can ask whether anyone in Switzerland can still speak in the name of the people.

Various official and non-official explanations have been given to this alarming development. The citizens, it is said, are tired of being troubled for matters which are often of little interest. The citizens, it is also said, do not understand much of the problems placed before him. These problems are mostly economic and technical and voters have no time to get the required education.

This may well be, but then let us give citizens this precious information. There are innumerable pedagogical experts in the corridors of official Switzerland proposing such an educational medicine. However, there are grounds for scepticism. When one sees what schools have done with civic instruction classes, there are few reasons to believe that they would be more successful in the field of political sciences. If a solution exists, it is more likely to be found at the other end: Rather than compel *real Switzerland* to reach the level of *official Switzerland*, the latter should climb down from its pedestal and, as it were, "diseducate" itself.

There may be economic problems in the Switzerland of 1975, but there are

above all language problems. The vocabulary, syntax and elementary materials of language used by official Switzerland and real Switzerland are not the same. They meet almost accidentally when the citizen recognises under the administrative morass what appears to emerge as a vague principle.

Federal Berne likes to use obscure language. It could be that it considers clarity as conflicting with seriousness, or perhaps finds it preferable to bury what is essential in a flood of accessory material to avoid any debate on what is essential.

Apart from a few recent votes such as the one on the Economic Article and others on public finance, it could be that this abstentionism has been of service to the Government. A mass of non-voters is preferable to a majority of dissidents for the preservation of eternal Switzerland. Perhaps, more simply, official Switzerland is strapped in the mentality of eternal Switzerland — a scrupulous and perfectionist mentality.

The abstruse and complicated language used by the authorities present the advantage that those who hear it can, in the end, retain only what they are looking for. From this thick broth it is possible to glean a word here and there such as "savings" and "expenditure". One can put them into opposition, make them clash according to the whims of some demagogues whose intellectual scruples are not always as correct as those of Berne. Federal Berne hates slogans and thus feeds those of her opponents. Would it not be preferable if Berne created its own slogans and used them?

The Left-Right polarity is an inadequate concept to describe Switzerland's present political reality. In a learned article published by the *Revue française de science politique* two professors of political sciences at Geneva University, Dr Roland Inglehart and Dr Dusan Sidjanski, claim that more factors are required to understand the way Swiss people see themselves politically.

The two writers note that the concept of Left and Right, although too simple and unable to account for the intricacies of public opinion, does broadly situate people into the two camps. Supporters of the Left are generally in favour of change, usually towards more egalitarianism, social progress and internationalism. The people who keep to the Right wish to maintain the status quo. They respect established authority, nationalism and want to maintain social continuity. While the Left wishes to attain its objectives by increased state intervention, the Right would like to keep this intervention strictly limited.

This double orientation should allow the voter to situate himself on a Left-Right axis and thus state a particular party political preference. It enables a classification of parties not only through their particular labels but by the way

they envisage solutions for a particular problem.

The writers note that this ideological division was almost irrelevant in the United States until a few years ago. There was a time when American votes hinged on traditional partisanship or attraction to particular personalities. Vietnam, racial segregation and other recent events in the United States have produced a kind of political polarisation with the Democrats far more to the "Left" than they have ever been. But the Left-Right polarisation is still markedly stronger in countries like France, Italy and West Germany which all have powerful left-wing parties inspired by Marxist traditions.

According to the two specialists, the situation in Switzerland today is more akin to the former American situation because a great number of citizens do not know where they stand on the Left-Right axis. As it were, the struggle between the Left and the Right way of looking at life and society is nowhere as intense or relevant as it is in Britain, where it has taken dramatic proportions.

Only 58 per cent of adult Swiss can say where they stand on the Left-Right line as against 80 per cent in neighbouring countries. The Swiss also give conflicting answers when asked to state the relative position of parties on the Left-Right line. Most would correctly place the three main coalition parties (Radicals, Christian Democrats and Socialists) but would find it hard to situate the Republican and National Action parties. The electors of the two parties consider themselves slightly to the Left of the Radical Party and the Christian Democrats while a great many outsiders place them at the extreme left and at the extreme right. The conclusion which the two researchers draw from this is that the attitude of voters towards the two controversial parties is unrelated to the Left-Right issue.

They say that two other polarities should be added. These are: Modernism-Traditionalism, Religious-Secular. Thus, while the Left-Right division might explain a voter's attitude towards State intervention in the affairs of the country, it can't explain attitudes to many other issues. The first Schwarzenbach Initiative against "over-foreignisation", although rejected by all the major parties, was almost accepted. This was due to a strong traditionalist current which other elections do not usually show so visibly. The National Action and the Republicans would thus stand for traditionalism and not a right or left-wing partisanship. Religious motivation also plays an important part, as attested by the geographical influence on votes to abolish the "Confessional" articles of the Constitution, and, more recently, by the way MPs reacted to the abortion bill.

The researchers state a number of reasons why the Left-Right polarity doesn't obtain in Switzerland as it does in many other countries. Switzerland, they insist, must be considered as a particular case. The most important factor is her

government by consensus and the existence of a constant coalition at the top. Decisions are more like "gentlemen's agreements" than the victory of a majority. This fact doesn't encourage the leading parties to present significantly

differing programmes. Another important "de-polarising" factor is the country's political de-centralisation. The liberal party in Geneva could, for example, have a very different position to the Liberal Party in Vaud on the same problem.

## TECHNICAL ITEMS

### RISE OF SWISS FRANC HITS FIRMS' EARNINGS

**BASLE** — The steep rise in the value of the Swiss franc is seriously undercutting the overseas earnings of some Swiss multinational corporations whose foreign sales form an important part of their financial structure.

This is according to reports from Sandoz and Ciba-Geigy, the chemicals and pharmaceuticals concerns based here.

Louis van Planta, chairman of Ciba-Geigy, said that although sales remain good, some key results of the company declined last year and prospects for improvement this year are slight, if the exchange rate remains at its current 2.47 francs to the dollar.

Speaking for Sandoz, finance director Peter Christen said that the exchange-rate problem and recession have killed hopes that the company's net profit in 1974 would beat 1972's record level of 235 million francs.

Consolidated sales (converted from local currencies) of Sandoz rose 10.5 per cent to 4 billion francs last year, for example. If 280 million francs had not been lost through the rise of the exchange rate, an 18 per cent sales growth would have been posted, the company said.

Ciba-Geigy's group sales rose 15 per cent last year to the equivalent of \$3.78 billion. Had exchange rates remained stable, the sales gain would have been 24 per cent, Mr von Planta said. And "had he consolidated in dollars worldwide instead of Swiss francs, the gain would have been 35 to 40 per cent."

Although the Swiss franc rate has caused some company problems with its group results, it also has made more attractive the climate for possible acquisitions, especially in the United States.

Sandoz is particularly interested in acquiring a US company in the field of artificial kidney work, either a kidney machine maker or a maker of filters for haemodialysis (artificial kidney) functions.

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### SWISS ELECTRONIC FIRE DETECTORS ON THE HIGH SEAS

The new British helicopter-carrier, HMS *Invincible*, will be equipped with electronic fire detectors from Männedorf of Zurich. These appliances will offer protection against fires by detecting them even before the first appearance of any smoke.

At sea, a fire is much more dangerous than on land, because it is only possible to fight it from one side. That is why the early detection of fire is of even greater importance than on terra firma.

### LESS THAN 20 PAPERS MAKE A PROFIT

The dramatic drop in vacancies and the general recession in Switzerland have caused additional hardship to the country's newspapers. Figures recently released by the Association of Swiss Newspaper Publishers indicate that insertions for vacancies had fallen by 58.2 per cent in the large newspapers whose advertising revenue had decreased by nearly a fifth since the beginning of the year.

The smaller newspapers, who have traditionally found it harder to keep afloat than the large papers have suffered relatively less from the crisis. The Association also stated that, at very most, there were only about 20 Swiss papers actually making a profit whereas over half of the Swiss press were registering a profit — generally small — in 1973.

The shortfall in revenue must be compensated somehow and newspapers are doing their utmost to rationalise. There has also been a reduction in the size of many publications.

The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, one of Switzerland's best managed papers, registered a 73 per cent drop in its profit. After a 1.3 million franc profit in 1973, Switzerland's paper of record made only 0.34 million last year but shareholders were to receive unchanged dividends of 10 per cent.

The paper relies for 82 per cent of its income on advertising. Income from

this source increased from 1973 to 1974 thanks to increased rates but the volume of space reserved fell by eight per cent. Advertising revenue reached 54.9 million francs. The *NZZ's* expenditure reached 59.02 million francs and a great part of the rise was due to the growing cost of paper. Editorial and correspondence costs are only a fraction, at 6.77 million francs of the total running costs.

### CONTINUAL WATER INSPECTION INSTRUMENT

Rivers, lakes and seas are so polluted by waste waters today that restoring them to their natural state has become a problem of vital importance. Consequently, those responsible for this pollution must now take steps to limit impurities to a permissible level; it is only by continual supervision of waste water, in particular at the point of discharge itself, that it will be possible to detect dangerous sources of pollution and take the steps needed to return comparatively pure water to the natural environment.

It is indispensable therefore to use measuring methods making permanent supervision possible, with minimum human intervention. To solve this problem, a big Swiss industrial firm at Baden has designed and built a new type of hydrometric station, which requires direct supervision by the personnel only at infrequent intervals even if the water is heavily polluted, in the case of sewage for example.

The firm's engineers have combined a number of measuring and recording instruments carrying out a continual analysis of the chemical and physical data of the main criteria of water. At the same time, a check is kept on the degree of limpidity (solid matter in suspension content), oxygen content, temperature, pH (measurement of the acidity or alkalinity) and the electric conductivity of the water. Reading the data thus recorded enables a rapid diagnosis to be made of the pollution and the indispensable protective measures to be taken.

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