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Concern of the Swiss Abroad

The Assembly of the Swiss Abroad at Zefingen in 1970 had as its theme "Total Revision of the Federal Constitution". A specially abridged version of the questionnaire had been sent to the Swiss abroad. A little over 38% of the 560 sent out, were answered. Opinions varied, but one thing was evident throughout that the Swiss State should be maintained as the carrier of a true and active democracy with its guarantee of real freedom. In Britain, the questionnaire had been discussed at length at the Nouvelle Société Helvétique in London and the Manchester Swiss Club. In February 1971, a detailed report of the discussions, as well as of the proceedings at Zefingen appeared in the *Swiss Observer*. At the Zefingen Assembly, Federal Councillor F. T. Wahlen had given the main address and summed up the round-table discussion in which Mrs Mariann Meier had been asked to participate as representative of a country in which parliamentary democracy was established.

At the meeting of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad in Berne at the end of February last, the draft of the new Constitution distributed, and a preliminary discussion took place. The delegates were asked to consult their communities and to report in August.

It was again left to the NSH to organise a discussion of the draft. It took place at a well-attended open meeting at the Embassy on 27th April. The discussion was introduced by Monsieur Paul André Ramseyer, First Secretary for Press, Legal and Tax Matters at the Swiss Embassy. He stressed that he spoke as a private citizen. First he gave a historic survey and explained the idea behind the draft Constitution. The main change is that there will be provision for a Legislative Initiative. So far, a lot of legislation has been pushed into the Constitution, which does not belong there. An example is Article 45 bis regarding the Swiss abroad. Here are just a few points Monsieur Ramseyer made.

The Church and the State will be separated, but the preamble (written by Adolf Muschg) begins "In the name of God, the Almighty!" The fundamental rights of the citizen are better defined, sex equality, even the right to strike, complete abolition of capital punishment and all censorship. There shall be administrative jurisdiction (which some Cantons already have). Workers' participation is in it, although the electorate rejected it clearly in 1976. The right of property will be guaranteed, and there is to be consumer protection.

There will be a civil service for

conscientious objectors in Art. 37, a substitute for military service, again a proposition which was rejected by the electorate in December 1976. Political rights – Art. 39 – could be given to foreign residents, but only in Cantons and Communes. (The Canton of Neuchâtel already has this).

There shall be four national and three official languages.

Article 42 provides for a change in the cantonal boundaries, subject to acceptance by electorate and Cantons. (This would take care of changes such as the proposed Canton Jura).

Generally, there is a tendency to increase the power of the State, a clear distribution of tasks to the Confederation and the Cantons (Art. 49–53). There is a suggestion of voting age beginning at 18, of a Parliamentary Commissioner and a possible increase of the Federal Council to 11.

Naturally, it was not possible for all the changes to be discussed in detail. But it was a good start, and the discussion was a very lively one. Many points were raised. The draft was called "a brave document, simple and deceptively clear". A number of ambiguities were pointed out. Monsieur Ramseyer was complimented on his exposé, and the President asked all present to let her have



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their opinions and suggestions by early August, as she would have to present a report for the Commission meeting at Einsiedeln. (Please write to Mrs. Mariann Meier, 53 Priory Road, London NW6 3NE, by 10th August.) Should you wish to have a copy of the draft, please write to Eidgenoessische Drucksachen-und Materialzentrale, 3000 Berne.

There is no doubt that it will take a long time until a new Constitution is accepted. It is true that the present one is loaded with ballast, and the mixed-up relationship between Confederation and Cantons needs clarification. The Constitution would fare badly in a beauty contest, but it does reflect the true political reality of Switzerland. Above all, it contains a strong substance of liberty. The present draft is linguistically beautiful, but some liberty rights and security valves against unlimited State interference are weakened if not pulled down.

It is remarkable that the experiment is entirely voluntary and not due to need or conflict. And the effort is an unique political deed to put our house in order in unity and peace, and the chance should not be missed.

The Federal Council will have to consider the answers from all the bodies involved in the consultative procedure (the Commission of the Swiss Abroad is just one of them). A final draft will then be submitted to the two Chambers, and they can accept, alter or reject it. Should the latter be the case, it can become subject of a popular Initiative, and then

the electorate will have to decide. Let us finish with something Federal Councillor Wahlen said at Zofingen:

"It would be wonderful if the occupation with the renewal of the Constitution could become a united effort to search for higher values. Whether the strength for the great deed of a total revision of our Federal

Constitution will arise from such an effort already in the next few years, cannot be predicted today. But it is certain that the vast amount of work will not have been in vain, and it will turn out for the good of our homeland." See Gottfried Keller's Letter from Switzerland.

M.M.

Yorkshire Swiss Club

At the recent A.G.M., held at the Central Library in Bradford, the Officers of the Club were re-elected for a further year.

President: Mr. O. Schreibke; Joint Secretaries: Mrs. Ruth Leathley, Mrs. Edith Lerch; Treasurer: Mr. Karl Kâgi.

During the past year we concentrated more on social activities and with this we have been able to attract some of the younger generation. Highlights of the season were our two Fondue parties, the second given for our paid up members by the Consul-General, Mr. Jaques, and Mrs. Jaques ably assisted by his staff from the Manchester Consulate. Another success was the by

now traditional Swiss Supper at the beginning of February.

Looking forward to next season it was decided to continue on the same lines. However, there will be an important change in the venues. We have lost our meeting place at the University Staff Club in Leeds. We have taken the opportunity to meet from now on alternate dates in Leeds and Bradford. It will make it easier for the members living in the west of Yorkshire to come.

In conclusion we may say it was a quite satisfactory year in the life of the club and as stated before we are very grateful for the continued interest and support our Consul-General and Mrs. Jaques have given us.

Q.C.S.

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