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THE CASE FOR THE UN

by W. L. Luetkens

Switzerland is the only state remaining in the world outside the UN not because it could not but because it would not join. That assertion can be found in a Swiss Government publication issued more than 30 years after the Foreign Ministry in Berne, in 1945, had first examined the question of membership.

The result then was that membership would be desirable — but incompatible with Swiss neutrality. Since those days the Swiss authorities have changed their minds — but public opinion almost certainly has not. Occasional straw polls show minorities of at best around 45 per cent in favour of joining.

Since the Berne Government cannot join unless it gets majority support in a referendum, that might be that. But since the case for applying is considered to be strong among the experts and among the leaderships of all four government parties, a cautious process of examination and of education has been in progress for several years.

It is difficult to tell precisely how successful it has been. The polls seem to indicate a slight trend in favour of the UN, but that may be due as much to world events as to a change of heart in Switzerland. In particular the Israeli–Egyptian peace may have helped. Swiss opinion has been profoundly pro-Israel and extremely critical of the Palestinians, whose appearance in the General Assembly have not been popular. Altogether, the Swiss, who live in a world of firmly bourgeois values heavily tinged with concepts of nineteenth century stability, have tended to look askance upon the General Assembly, dominated as it is by a to them undisciplined Third World.

The case for joining has been succinctly put by Herrn Fritz Hon-

negger, who is responsible for economic policy in the Swiss government. Decisions of economic importance, he has said, are increasingly being taken in the political arena. Switzerland, with extremely close worldwide economic links, must not stand aloof from the discussion of matters that directly affect its interests.

On those grounds the Government, at the request of both Houses of Parliament, has instructed the Foreign Ministry (known in Berne as the Federal Political Department) to prepare a proposal for joining. This will take a year or so, and another year will pass before a referendum is likely. So it might be held in 1981 or 1982. (Since it will be an election year 1983 looks improbable.) But will the vote really be held then? A defeat would be politically embarrassing, though there are those in Berne who say the risk will have to be taken.

At its simplest, but maybe also its most effective, the case against joining is put by Herr Otto Fischer, director of an extremely influential association of small industrialists and tradesmen, and a Member of Parliament. Switzerland, he declares, has no need of an active foreign policy. Moreover, it has been committed since 1815 to permanent neutrality and a policy of non-interference and non-partisanship.

Herr Fischer claims, with only a little politician's licence, to have defeated almost singlehanded a referendum for a reform of the tax system in 1977. So he is a man to be feared. But does his argument about neutrality hold up? The Foreign Ministry says "no". It argues that not only Switzerland but the UN has travelled a long way since 1945 when, indeed, it was the successor to the winning alliance in a war from which the Swiss had abstained.

The idea of military sanctions to ensure collective security (Chapter VII of the Charter) has in practice remained a dead letter. Instead there is the concept of peace keeping, and the official case in Berne is that neutrality would not prevent the Swiss from taking part in peace keeping operations.

Economic sanctions would not pose insuperable obstacles in the official view. Austria joined in sanctions against Rhodesia but made a reservation safeguarding its neutral status. Switzerland itself, so the argument goes in Berne, had to take certain unilateral measures to stop itself becoming a loophole in the somewhat permeable system of sanctions erected against Rhodesian trade.

In any case the Swiss do not stand entirely aloof from international organisations, whether of the UN or not. They belong to the Council of Europe, played a small but active part in the Conference for European Co-operation and Security, they have full membership in what is left of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and a trade agreement (though without political overtones) with the European Economic Community. They belong to a number of UN organs and specialised agencies and have made financial contributions to others and to peace-keeping. In Palestine they supplied an aircraft with crew. Oddly enough they do not belong to the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund.

Swiss membership in Unctad (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) shows that even in Switzerland government convictions can prevail against popular beliefs. There is no doubt that aid and economic concessions to the developing world are no more popular among the Swiss than elsewhere. Yet the Swiss do belong to Unctad.



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But before setting out for the latest Unctad meeting this month, the leader of the Swiss delegation had to confess that Switzerland was going to be in trouble for its low aid effort. Government aid is expected to rise from the equivalent of 0.19 per cent of GNP to 0.25 per cent by 1981.

The developing countries are pressing for 0.7 per cent.

He also referred to another problem for the Swiss. They are great exporters of technical know-how and licenses. As the leader of the delegation put it, "that is our raw

material — our oil". So Switzerland looks askance upon proposals for a wholesale technological transfer to developing countries.

Storm

On a more political level, Swiss relations with the Third World caused a political storm in Berne in January when Mr. Pierre Aubert, the Foreign Minister, made a tour of five African states. M. Aubert feels that Swiss foreign policy should be made more dynamic and should keep up with the problems of the contemporary world. But even some of his friends were unhappy about a joint communiqué which he signed in Lagos because it appeared to single out apartheid alone in a condemnation of violations of human rights.

A stir was also caused when Israel, in April, complained about the possibility that a representative of the PLO might be received for official meetings in Berne. The Swiss reacted testily, but it is likely to be some time yet before such a meeting actually takes place.

Somehow the episode adds poignancy to a remark that you can hear in official circles in Berne that as long as Switzerland stays outside the world organisation, its representative at the UN will have a status much like that of the PLO's man.

SWITZERLAND AND UN ACTIVITIES

Activity*	Swiss status†	Contribution 1977, Sw.Fr.
International Court	M	50,457
Unctad	M	431,486
Relief & Works for Palestine Refugees	C	6,267,000
Children's Fund	M	11,474,000
High Commission for Refugees	M	2,125,000
World Food Programme	C	7,500,000
Development Programme	M	22,968,400
Environment Programme	C	1,000,000
Industrial Development Organisation	M	468,140
Economic Committee for Europe	M	291,831
GATT	M	662,200
International Labour Office	M	1,586,766
Food and Agriculture Organisation	M	1,889,373
Unesco	M	2,948,640
Membership in neutral nations' commission, Korea		503,959
Contributions peace keeping, Cyprus		850,000
Aircraft for truce surveillance, Palestine		1,413,341

* Selection only. † M = member, C = contributor.

Source: Swiss Policy Department.

This article was part of a survey on Switzerland in the FINANCIAL TIMES of 23rd May, 1979, and we are reprinting it with permission of the FINANCIAL TIMES.

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