

Swiss federal problems

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SWISS FEDERAL PROBLEMS.

(*"The Economist,"* 16.3.40.)

The election in Switzerland on February 22nd of a new Federal Councillor to replace Signor Motta perhaps deserved more attention than it received. A country whose elected representatives elect its ministers and judges is exceptional; and a country where, despite the presence of several language groups of disproportionate size, these elections are carried through without any trace of bitter rivalry is remarkable. In these days of talk about Federal Union among the nations a well-grown and workaday federation is worth close study.

About three-quarters of the Swiss population is German-speaking and five out of seven Federal Councillors are German-Swiss. The sixth being French-Swiss it was found satisfactory to elect Dr. Celio, of the Cantonal Government of Ticino, to represent the small Italian-Swiss group and also — in a sense — the few thousand *romanche*-speaking Swiss. While in the general life of Switzerland, in parliamentary debates, for instance, and particularly in economic affairs, the German-Swiss naturally predominate, it is interesting and characteristic that on the Federal Tribunal at Lausanne the legal prowess of the Latin spirit is recorded; out of 26 federal judges, while 15 are German-speaking, there are seven French and two Italian-Swiss.

In the last war Swiss sympathies were very much divided. The Confederation is strengthened to-day by the fact that the Swiss almost unanimously recognise in totalitarian Germany the worst enemy of their own federal and democratic way of living. This clearly eases the strain of the state of mobilisation or armed neutrality in which Switzerland now lives. But this mobilisation impairs those Swiss qualities through which the country has become a model of democratic federalism; the longer the mobilisation lasts the more this will be so. The Swiss Army, like other Continental armies, is based on compulsory service, and is not, as the British Army was until recently, something apart from the nation. Nevertheless, the Swiss tradition of guarding against military influence has been such that the army knows no generals in peacetime: and when war comes it is the National Assembly that

elects a general from among the colonels of the General Staff. It is therefore with anxiety that many Swiss find the control of their press, for example, in military hands under a Federal Decree of last September. Recent parliamentary protests have evoked promises from the Federal Government that civilians are in future to co-operate more actively with the military *Abteilung für Presse und Funkspruch*.

THE COST OF VIGILANCE.

It is the financial problem, however, that to-day puts Swiss federalism most severely to the test. The cost of maintaining the country in a condition of armed neutrality is enormous. Switzerland, moreover, has habitually lived upon the export of manufactured goods (for which the raw materials have had to be imported) and upon tourist traffic. Since the war exporting has become — except for certain categories of goods — much more difficult, and tourist traffic has vanished almost completely. The Federal Government is responsible for military costs, yet Federal revenue, which *en principe* derives from indirect taxation, is hit by the fall in foreign trade.

It is part of the Swiss federal system that direct taxation and the methods by which it is raised are the affairs of the separate cantons and of the communes within the cantons. It has for many years been necessary for the cantons to hand over a considerable part of the proceeds of direct taxation to the Federal Government. Since the present war it has become inevitable that the proportion which goes to the Federal authorities should greatly increase. The War Budget now under discussion introduces two more or less new taxes, the *Wehropfer* and *Wehrsteuer*, to be levied (since there is no federal apparatus for such a purpose) by the cantons in their own way upon capital and incomes. The whole proceeds are to be handed over to the Federal Treasury, which will then return to the cantons 10 per cent. of the money raised by the *Wehropfer*, and things stand at the moment, 25 per cent. of the *Wehrsteuer*. The money returned to the cantons from Berne is to be redistributed in proportion to the population figures of each canton.

THE CANTONS' COMPLAINTS.

The Government's fiscal proposals are arousing a good deal of resentment. The two main lines of attack upon the Finance Minister, Dr. Wetter, are, on the one hand, that he is bleeding the cantons and, on the other, that he is discriminating between them. To answer the second charge first, he replies that to redistribute the available money according to the size of the cantonal population is naturally hard on the richer cantons which have contributed far more per head, but it is fundamentally just that they should help the poorer ones, or, as it often means, that the wealthy towns should contribute to the expenses of the poor mountain districts. To this the canton of Zürich and especially that of Basle-city reply that they contribute more than other cantons because they have organised the collection of taxes much more systematically and with far fewer loopholes. The rich but well-governed city of Basle is particularly bitter with regard to its financial fate. Its representatives point out that they contributed more than any other canton per head to the Crisis Tax (*Krisenabgabe*) which preceded the present *Wehrsteuer* and that they will certainly con-

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tinue to do so, while receiving just the same amount back per person as poor cantons like Valais, Uri or Fribourg, where the cost of living is incomparably lower.

To the charge of bleeding the cantons the Federal Treasury replies that, owing to the increased rate of income tax, the cantons are in fact to receive 30 million francs, or 50 per cent. more than the federal subventions which have hitherto reached them. But from the Socialist side, it is complained that cantonal expenses, what with rising prices and the preparation of protection against possible air-raids, have already risen beyond that proportion, and that what will in fact happen will be that the cantons will be forced to help the communes less, and that it will become necessary to raise municipal charges on gas, tramways, etc., and therewith the cost of living, especially of working people.

The Swiss War Budget has so far been approved only by the Upper Chamber or Council of Estates, which succeeded in raising the cantons' share of the *Wehrsteuer* returns from 20 to 25 per cent., during the February session of both Houses of Parliament. In March the Budget will come before the National Council, and it should subsequently be submitted to a vote of the whole people. Meanwhile, the country is living partly upon the reserves of the Swiss Federal Bank, while a Defence Loan of 200 million francs has just been floated. The Federal Council has been armed, for the period of the war, with full powers to take action which need only come before the Chambers for posthumous discussion. This is in itself a suspension of the federal system. But the financial problem, though aggravated by wartime circumstances, is fundamental. It cannot be solved unless the cantons abandon their fiscal independence, their right to levy taxes in their own way. Though it is nearly a hundred years since the cantons, by the constitution of 1848, surrendered their sovereign rights, their fiscal autonomy is still jealously cherished. Full federation is not easy.

LETTER BOX.

J. B. — We thank you for the CSM. We should like to reproduce both articles but we are afraid we would rouse the susceptibilities of several of our compatriots who hold similar positions in this country to the one occupied by "Oscar" at the Waldorf-Astoria at New York, and who do not enjoy such publicity though well deserved. The other article by Prof. William Rappard we are reprinting in part in this issue; it is singular that an English version should reach us in such a roundabout way. ED. S.O.

F. E. C. — Zurich. We have now noted your new address. Quite a number of S.O.s have been returned to us (on which we were charged return postage) so that we had to remove your name from our mailing list. It is a pity that you omitted to notify change of address when you left this country. Your subscription runs for another six weeks, up to No. 963.

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LA NEUTRALITE ET LES LIBERTES CONSTITUTIONNELLES.

Il n'est point de problème qui soit plus discuté aujourd'hui dans le monde entier que celui de la neutralité. L'affaire de l'Altmark a montré que les puissances professent à ce sujet des thèses qui sont difficilement conciliables avec celles des neutres. Certaines démarches diplomatiques qui tendent à entraîner les petits Etats neutres dans une politique de blocus contre l'un des belligérants, font apparaître dans une lumière crue la même évidence. Enfin, la campagne que la presse allemande vient de mener contre la presse suisse nous permet de faire des constatations dans le même sens.

Les idées répandues par les journaux allemands tout au long de cette campagne ne sont pas nouvelles. L'année dernière déjà, bien avant la guerre, un publiciste national-socialiste du nom de Bockhoff s'en réclamait à grand bruit. Il affirmait qu'un pays ne peut pas se prétendre neutre, quand ses autorités sont seules à ne pas s'ingérer dans un conflit extérieur, quand les citoyens se permettent de porter un jugement indépendant sur les événements internationaux, quand ils ne dissimulent pas leurs sympathies, bref quand l'opinion publique a toute liberté de s'exprimer. Tout naturellement, comme la presse est l'organe de l'opinion publique, comme elle en publie les réactions, c'est à elle surtout que s'en prennent les propagandes étrangères.

Cette thèse est parfaitement conforme à la lettre et à l'esprit des doctrines totalitaires. Dans les pays qui se sont donné ce régime, les citoyens sont étroitement soumis dans tous les actes de leur vie à l'Etat et à la raison d'Etat. On attend d'eux qu'ils se fassent les fidèles serviteurs du gouvernement au pouvoir. On ne tolère pas qu'ils aient une opinion personnelle, ni surtout qu'ils l'expriment.

Chaque peuple est libre de se donner le régime de son choix ou de sa préférence. Mais, précisément parce que les Suisses ne veulent pas d'un régime de ce genre, ils ne peuvent pas interpréter les principes essentiels de leur politique intérieure ou extérieure à la lumière d'une doctrine qui n'est pas la leur. Ils ne sauraient le faire sans se renier eux-mêmes. Au contraire, ils ont le devoir impérieux de rester fidèles en toutes circonstances aux idées libérales auxquelles ils sont étroitement attachés.

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