

The unequal status of women in Switzerland

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THE UNEQUAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN SWITZERLAND.

An N.S.H. Lecture.

Maitre Antoinette Quinche, President of the "Association Vaudoise pour le suffrage féminin" and Vice-President of the "Association Suisse pour le suffrage féminin", was invited by the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique to give a lecture on "The Position of Women in Switzerland" on 29th November, 1955. The following is a summary of the main points of her extremely interesting address which was given in French.

Switzerland, celebrated all over the world as a model of democracy, where the people has not only the right to elect members of Parliament but can also decide directly by referendum and initiative for or against all major measures of legislation — this old and most highly developed democracy is a genuine democracy only for men. All political rights in Switzerland are exclusively exercised by the male half or, more exactly, by the 47% of the grown up part of the population, whereas the 53% or 1.5 million women above 20 have no say in the management of national, cantonal and local affairs. While practically all civilised countries in the world and even most of the uncivilised ones have granted their women fully equal political rights in the course of the last 40 years, Switzerland finds herself left behind in this respect in the dubious company of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Irak, Jordania, Yemen, Egypt, Ethiopia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua. Full political equality was granted to women first in Australia 1901, Finland 1907, Iceland and Norway 1913, Denmark 1915, then in the Soviet Union in 1917, in Germany, Austria, Poland in 1918, Newzealand and Luxembourg in 1919, the United States of America in 1920 and the other 40 odd countries following suit — mostly before or just after the second world war. The United Kingdom introduced political rights for women in stages which were completed in 1925. France reached that point in 1944 and Italy in 1947. Thus our dear old country has remained an island of injustice to women as well as an island of peace in the midst of a Europe that has long since recognised in law, what the hard experiences of wartime, economic crisis and revolutions have established in fact — the equal claim by state and community on all available manpower irrespective of sex.

One of the reasons for this sad state of affairs

may be found in the fact that in all other countries the crucial decision was taken by the Parliaments, whereas in Switzerland the whole people or rather the male section has to be won over to the change of sharing rights and responsibilities with their women-folk. The very distinction of the system of full democracy in Switzerland has thus proved the most obstinate brake on political progress. It is far easier to win over an adequate majority of 300 parliamentarians than of 2½ million voters. Since the first world war no fewer than 23 cantonal votes have been taken in Switzerland regarding the introduction of political rights for women. While the first results registered only some 25% in favour of this reform, later votes approached up to 44% in the case of Geneva in 1946 and up to 45% in Basel Stadt in 1954. The women themselves have been slow in coming round to the support of the demand for equal rights, but officially organised test votes amongst the women of Geneva in 1952 and of Basel in 1954 and Zurich in 1955 produced very large majorities of 85%, 73%, and 92% in favour of partial or full political rights.

It should be remembered that in no country were the men first asked to say whether they wanted the vote, the demand for which has always been voiced by politically conscious minorities. Thus it is no valid argument against the women's vote to say that many of them do not even demand it. In many important referendums hardly half the male voters have taken the trouble of going to polling booths and in village votes the active participation sinks as low as 10% on frequent occasions.

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The usefulness of women in public life has of course not remained entirely unrecognised in Switzerland. In Basle and Vaud women have access to all public functions as secretaries, treasurers, jurors, judges, trustees, care of orphans, etc. Some 30 national and cantonal commissions comprise women amongst their members, especially commissions concerned with health matters, child care, etc. In the two world wars Swiss women have not only held the fort on the domestic front and often in commerce and industry, while their menfolk were doing military service, but they have also played an increasingly important part in para-military organisations. Women in Switzerland are of course subject to exactly the same taxation as men. 1½ millions of women above 18 in Switzerland are unmarried or widowed or divorced, while married women number less than 1 million. Thus less than half of Swiss women can be regarded as being represented politically by their husbands, whereas the other, bigger and tax-paying half remains completely unrepresented even in this indirect way.

The desire and need for political rights of women in Switzerland is not only a question of principle and abstract justice. There are many inequalities in other respects to which women are subject and which may only be remedied when the women themselves can see to it through their political rights. The Civil Code of 1912 introduced many innovations in the law of inheritance, of persons, marriage and families and of ownership. It established amongst other things the principle of equality in marriage, constituting a great advance on the Code Napoléon. But it was still

limited by prevailing conceptions as to the superiority of the male in many respects. It is the husband who is regarded as the *chef de famille*, who can do as he pleases, while the wife has to subordinate her activity to his superior will. The wife loses on marriage not only her name but also her own local *Heimatrecht* and even her nationality on marriage to a foreigner, unless she avails herself of the recently established right to declare her desire to remain Swiss before marrying. The Swiss woman is expected to accept her husband's choice of domicile to which she can object only on strong grounds of unsuitability and establish her own domicile which the husband has no need to accept for himself. If the husband does not approve of his wife's own choice of work and profession she can continue in it only by recourse to a court of law. Worst of all the woman loses all command over her own property and income on marriage, unless she takes the appropriate legal steps to establish separation of property, a requirement of which prac-



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tical use is made only exceptionally before it is too late. In most cases the wife has to account for every penny of her own income to which the husband is normally entitled as the head of the family. On separation the wife has to prove her ownership or else all property goes to the husband.

Even as regards the rights of parentage, which should be exercised jointly according to Swiss law, full equality does not exist in so far as in cases of disagreement the father has the final say. In professional life full legal equality is provided for, but actually very few women are accepted in any of the higher posts, however well qualified they may be. Equality of pay exists in many cases only on paper, while in actual fact the scales of pay are often subdivided nominally in such a way as to discriminate against the inferior sex. Often there are naked differentiations in the scales of salary for male and female teachers, etc.

No doubt there may have existed some rhyme and reason for traditional differences of rights based on different responsibilities imposed by law on the lords of creation in previous ages. But in our modern world so much more is expected from the women alongside with their men or, in the majority of cases, in the absence of men. And many of the good old traditions and conditions of a sheltered and peaceful life, which may hitherto have compensated the women for many inequalities in the eyes of the law, have vanished more or less completely. Thus these inequalities have become grave injustices crying out aloud for rectification in the interest not only of the women themselves but also of their families, their husbands and children and the community and nation at large.

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SWISS CLUB, DUNFERMLINE.

The Swiss Community of Dunfermline with their Scottish friends spent a most enjoyable evening at Canmore Works Canteen on the 10th January, 1956. We had the pleasure of seeing the film "Journal-Suisse 1955" which we so kindly received from the N.H.G. in Berne.

It has become a fact that we do now expect to receive from our friends in Berne, what one might call "a survey of festivities" during the past year in our Homeland.

We also had the pleasure of seeing another film produced and shown to us by Mr. William McKissock who has certainly made some interesting pictures on his journey from Zurich right up to the Jungfrau. We are most interested to see a new film of his to which we understand he is now putting the finishing touches. May we have the pleasure of seeing same during our next winter's programme of entertainment.

To both Mr. Farrell and Mr. McKissock we offer our sincere thanks for coming along with their projectors to show us these films. We also offer our appreciation to Mr. Schnoenenberger for serving us with a very good supper.

Au Revoir at our next month's function.

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