

Parliamentary autumn session

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PARLIAMENTARY AUTUMN SESSION

The Federal Parliament had a crowded autumn session in September/October. Apart from thirty-five items of business in the National Council and twenty-eight in the Council of States, over forty Motions, Postulates and Interpellations had to be dealt with. But already some weeks before the two Councils met, there was a real boom of Parliamentary Commission meetings, some seventy in all.

On the fourth day of the autumn session, a decision of special interest to the Swiss abroad was made when the extension of the Federal Decree regarding the permit required by foreigners for purchasing land in Switzerland was debated. Hitherto all Swiss living abroad had to apply for permission, which was considered unfair. Now, against the recommendation of the Federal Council, Parliament has decided that in future the Swiss abroad would be exempt from having to get a permit. (See "Swiss Observer" 22nd October, report on the meeting of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad.)

Since the construction of National Roads was begun, there is hardly a parliamentary session at which this subject does not crop up in one way or another. This time it was in connection with the rising cost. Originally, it was estimated that 3.5 milliards would be needed, this was later increased to 5.7, and now the Federal Council's report visualises a total cost of over 12 milliards of francs. In some quarters, it was suggested that National Road construction was to be compared with the "Mirage" fighters. But it was justly pointed out that road estimates were only tentative calculations, whereas the "Mirage" was a fully constructed and complete aeroplane.

The "Mirage" report was discussed subsequently, and it was surprising that there was no livelier debate, seeing that an additional credit of 150 million francs was needed. The "Landesring" Party recorded its dissention, as long as the personal consequences of the "Mirage" affair had not yet been drawn. But their protest was received with silence, the report was accepted by 92 : 12 votes and the additional credit by 89 : 34.

For some time the Stamp Duty has been a subject for debate. First, the Council of States decided to drop this tax which is 44 years old. The National Council has twice repudiated this proposal, in spite of their preparatory commission recommending acceptance. When the National Council debated the new Anticipatory Tax (Verrechnungssteuer), those in favour of dropping the Stamp Duty were 81, those against 87, and in the third week, the National Council gave in and agreed to drop it.

Parliament debated the contribution to the "Pro Helvetia" Foundation, and the Council accepted the proposal to increase the annual subsidy gradually to 4 million francs, still a more than modest sum for cultural work compared to the vast sums spent on other things.

The Council of States granted a credit of 700 million francs for armaments — in half an hour! In the National Council, 68 million francs were voted for the purchase of anti-tank weapons of the Swedish type "Bantam" and 203 million francs for telecommunication equipment.

The National Council supported the Council of States in the proposed increase of 5% in the cost of living grant to federal employees.

In the third week, the main subject for debate was the extension and consolidation of the "Verwaltungskontrolle", the supervision of administration. There has been much criticism ever since the "Mirage" affair.

Twenty-five speakers took part in the long debate, and in the fourth week, the National Council agreed to the revision proposals unanimously. (There will be more about this in a future issue.)

The question of Switzerland's possible entry into the United Nations was the reason for a debate on foreign policy. Federal Councillor Wahlen opened it with a brilliant address which the Federal President called Mr. Wahlen's "Political Testament" when his resignation was announced. At the time of Federal Councillor Wahlen's speech, his intention to resign was not yet known. Parliament listened with undivided attention to this remarkable speech.

Like the Council of States, the National Council debated the report on the measures to combat the excessive economic boom. In spite of some strong criticism, the general attitude of the M.P.'s was favourable to the report, especially since the trade deficit has been reduced and the number of foreign workers has gone down by about 45,000 in a year. Elsewhere in Switzerland, there is still uneasiness and opposition to the measures which are considered artificial and damaging to Swiss economy.

The National Council agreed to a credit of 2.7 million francs for the final work in the improvement of the Linth Plain and 23.1 mio for the third stage in the extension of the Kloten airport. This was necessary as within ten years, air traffic at Kloten has doubled, passenger traffic quadrupled and freight traffic quintupled.

Finally, two matters of interest from the Council of States: There was a Motion asking for a total revision of the Federal Constitution. In a Postulate, the Federal Council was asked to support any efforts to invigorate the federalistic system in the sense of the recent action of the New Helvetic Society who created a special Foundation for this purpose.

(By courtesy of A.T.S., "Basler Nachrichten" and "Schweizerisches Kaufmännisches Zentralblatt".)

OLMA — THE ST. GALL AGRICULTURAL SHOW

The Swiss fair for agriculture and dairy farming was held in St. Gall from 7th to 17th October under the motto "Herbstzyt — Olmazyt". Federal Councillor Chaudet spoke on behalf of the Government on the "Official Day", and prominent personalities attended the opening at the Scala Cinema. For the first time, a foreign country exhibited, France. There was considerable doubt in some quarters if this was a wise step as Switzerland already imported large amounts of foreign agricultural produce. The show, however, was a great success, and last year's record was beaten by about 9% with the total number of visitors reaching 362,000.

Of special attraction was the Appenzell Day. The Canton whose turn it is to organise the cattle show at the OLMA, arranges a procession. As this was Appenzell this year, the pageant was particularly colourful.

The capital of the OLMA has been increased from 1.8 to 2.5 million francs, and this will mean further expansion in the coming years.

[A.T.S.]

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