

Letters from Switzerland

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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

BRITAIN'S IMAGE IN THE SWISS MEDIA

The image of Britain in the Swiss media is, at present, not a very rosy one. Even though most Swiss correspondents in London quite obviously try hard to avoid painting too gloomy a picture — one of them even seems to bend over backwards — the new wave of strikes is viewed here with understandable concern.

What no commentator appears to be able to explain is the fact that Trade Unions nowadays are, in some cases, unable to control their own members and thus to prevent secondary picketing. The fact that the Government's five per cent limitation of income increases has completely broken down is described here as a factor which is bound to open the floodgate to further and further demands — which, if finally granted, mean that the inflation rate is bound to go up again with a corresponding decrease in the value of sterling.

Even the most pro-British commentators cannot gloss over the fact that the situation on the industrial front and in a wider sense on the economic side is far from encouraging. Nor does anybody understand here that water pipes in Britain are still constructed in such a way that a spell of cold weather is identifiable with frozen and burst pipes.

As it is, sordid stories make larger headlines than positive news, both in Britain and in Switzerland. Thus it goes without saying that the ghastliness of the Minehead proceedings against the former Liberal Leader Jeremy Thorpe has filled not only columns, but whole pages in certain Swiss papers. The Thorpe case has been likened to the Profumo scandal, even though the latter involved a female person, which the former does not. Whatever the outcome of the Thorpe affair at the Old Bailey, an impression has been created in a variety of Swiss papers that some sections of the British so-called High Society show a marked degree of decadence.

Foreign correspondents abroad — and here I am speaking from life-long experience — are sometimes in quite a delicate position. On the one hand they have to report facts and actual occurrences to their readers, and on the other they do not like to write about matters which, if reported back and read in Britain, are bound to hurt many feelings in their host-countries. While good relations with the authorities are in their own and in the interest of their em-

By Gottfried Keller

ployers, they have yet to guard against becoming more papal than the Pope, or more pro-British than the British.

A strange streak in many Britains is that they themselves may say very negative things about certain aspects of life in Britain — food for example, or plumbing, or trade relations — but tend to get cross if an alien does the same or agrees with them. This being so, Swiss correspondents in Britain are wise always to try and strike a fair balance between what is positive and what is negative.

The image of one country in the media — press, radio, television — of another country is, naturally, composed of a great many aspects. Britain's image in the Swiss media is, at present, not a very rosy one. Churchill once spoke of "Britain's finest hour". On studying the Swiss press, one does not get the impression that Britain's finest hour is now.

ELECTION YEAR

1979 will be a year of important elections both in Switzerland and in Britain. In Switzerland, which is governed by a coalition of the four most important parties, they might show a different trend and in Britain, with its One-Party-Government, they might even bring about a change of régime. While in Switzerland parliamentary elections for both chambers have to take place every four years, the timing of elections for one of the two houses in Britain within a framework of five years is left to the Prime Minister.

Both countries are, of course, democracies: Switzerland in the most direct sense possible, whereas the British citizens elect MPs and leave everything to them afterwards. In Switzerland's direct democracy, which puts quite a strain on its citizens, an average of somewhere between 35 and 40% of those entitled to vote usually go to the polling stations, whereas in Britain the average usually reaches about 80%.

The rather poor participation in Switzerland is quite understandable, since the Swiss are called upon to vote at least four times — on usually four to six items a time — per annum. Under the Swiss system the voter has a very definite say, even concerning taxation, whereas under the British system it is assumed that Westminster and Whitehall know best.

Both systems, no doubt, have their advantages and disadvantages. It would seem to me that a system somewhere in the midst between the two — giving the Swiss a little less and the Britisher a little more influence — would be ideal. The Swiss system with its many party lists — some 20 in the Canton of Zürich and 23 in the Canton of Berne! — and its innumerable items on borough, cantonal and federal level, simply puts too much strain on the conscientious male or female (especially the latter) citizen.

About three weeks before any polling day informative booklets are issued by the authorities, explaining the issues at stake in great detail and adding recommendations on how the magistrates hope the people will vote. But some of these booklets are written in style which is not very easy to read and on top of this they can run to dozens and dozens of pages with small print. Since returning to Switzerland some six years ago, I have, to give the reader an example, been asked to go to the Polling Station some 24 times and to vote on more than 100 items.

I have, for example, been asked to vote for the election or re-election of local school teachers — whom I do not know and about whose qualifications I simply have no idea. I have also been asked to vote about highly technical matters — such as building a road tunnel underneath the Zürich end of the lake — which, frankly, I am not competent to judge.

Every time a voting day has passed both the authorities and the media complain about the poor participation of the people. It does, of course, seem somewhat grotesque that about a third of those entitled to vote should be in a position to adopt or reject a change in the Constitution of a new law — which, if adopted, affects everyone. But this is the case. Democracy, Churchill once said, is the worst possible system of Government — leaving all other systems apart. The Swiss system does, as the reader will have seen, put quite a considerable strain on its citizens, but it yet suits the country with its federalistic structure.

MISCELLANEOUS ADVERTISEMENT

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