

Swiss democracy

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SWISS DEMOCRACY.

By ARNOLD LUNN.

(The following article is reprinted from the February issue of "The Spectator" by courtesy of the Editor.)

Aristotle maintained that Democracy is only a transition stage between oligarchy and dictatorship. Representative government can, in other words, only endure if representation is limited to men of property. I might be inclined to agree with Aristotle but for the success of Democracy in Switzerland.

Swiss Democracy differs in many important respects from our own. In the first place, Switzerland is governed by a permanent coalition which has lasted since 1848. The Bundesrat is unhampered by any doctrine of collective responsibility. The Socialist member feels free to advise his party to vote against a measure sponsored by every member of the Bundesrat. If a Bill unanimously approved by the Bundesrat is rejected by the Federal Assembly the Bundesrat placidly accepts the decision. The executive *never* resigns. Their duty is to govern Switzerland in the interests not of any particular party but of the Swiss people as a whole. Concessions have to be made to *every* party from the Conservatives to the Socialists. One of the illusions of political thought is that Democracy necessarily means party government. I said something to this effect at the Alpine Club in the course of a lecture on *Switzerland Revisited*. The president, Mr. Leo Amery, formerly Secretary of State for India, made the following comments which I quote with his permission. "The British system works well in England because of our national dislike of extremists and our genius for compromise. It has been an almost unmitigated disaster for most of the continental countries which adopted it. It will never work in India. If the Hindus had the majority they would give no jobs excepting to Hindus. *Mutatis mutandis* if the Muslims had the majority. I have for years advocated something like the Swiss system for India."

The stability of the Swiss Government is due, among other things, to the influence of the peasant, for, unlike so many of our urban intellectuals, the peasant is a realist, and knows that you cannot reap without sowing, and that you have to work as well as vote for a higher standard of living. In other Democracies the interests of the country are often completely subordinated to those of the town; but no government in Switzerland would dare to disregard the interests of the peasant. Both the peasants and the trade unions exercise great influence, with the result that both town and country get a fair deal.

Whereas in other Democracies the Left Wing

parties are traditionally hostile to the army, and inclined to pacifism, in Switzerland, thanks again to the realism of the peasant, there is no pacifism and no conscientious objection. But perhaps the most important factor in the stability of Swiss democracy is the Catholic tradition of pre-Christian Europe, by which even the Protestant cantons are unconsciously influenced. The Swiss realise that both power and property must be widely distributed if the State is to remain free. The strong regionalism of the cantons, nowhere more strong than in the Catholic cantons, is an effective check to tyrannical centralisation. Recent legislation has reinforced the traditions which in the past operated against the development of great landed proprietors.

I have often wondered how the Swiss contrived to prevent the concentration of land in the hands of the few. "Well, it's very difficult," said a Swiss friend of mine, "to persuade a peasant to sell. He says 'land is worth more than money.'"

What infinite wisdom is crystallised in that saying! Land, of course, does change hands in small quantities. Anybody who wanted to buy enough land to build a chalet with a garden would have no difficulty, but once a man starts to buy land as a mere speculation difficulties begin. A member of the Swiss Parliament told me that in his valley a rich refugee was ready to buy any land that was for sale, but the word went round, "Don't sell," for the peasants instinctively felt that their way of life was being threatened.

The son of a wealthy Swiss manufacturer was used as an agent to buy part of an alp for his father-in-law, who foresaw that war was inevitable and who felt that if he owned an alp he would, at least, be sure of butter and cheese, but the Government stepped in and forbade the sale on the ground that he was not a farmer and would have to hire somebody to run the alp for him. Ruskin would have been delighted, for the tendency of such legislation is in accord with the Ruskinian principle, "property to whom proper."

Swiss democracy works because it is both conservative and progressive, the Tory democracy of which Disraeli dreamed, but which he never achieved. "In those 15 months," writes Mr. Eugene Bagger in his book *The Heathen are Wrong*, "I came to regard Switzerland as the finest democracy in the world, a democracy based on the effort of hard thinking, and the dignity of hard work and the beauty of self-imposed discipline. It was the one democracy in Europe that was one the one hand truly democratic, and on the other hand *worked*: and this was because of all the European democracies it remained most faithful to the Christian origin of our civilisation. It was the most advanced of the European nations, because it was the most conservative."

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