

The Representatives of the People in Switzerland: The National Council

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THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PEOPLE IN SWITZERLAND: THE NATIONAL COUNCIL.

By Dr. H. BÖSCHENSTEIN.

In accordance with the Swiss Constitution, the National Council, which represents the people of Switzerland, only remains in office for a period of four years. The last election took place in December 1947 and the next one will be in December 1951. So, the National Council is now approximately at the end of its term of office, and it is at this moment that the Federal Statistical Office has just published a volume dealing with the election of members of the National Council — a volume which has been awaited with the keenest interest by all those who are interested in politics. This survey gives information regarding the strength of the Parties, the manner in which the representatives of the People are elected, their age, their profession, the origin of their electors according to Parties.

In view of the prevailing system of proportional representation, the Swiss elector can play about to his heart's content, deciding which of the representatives of the various Parties he is going to put on his list. Thus, we find that certain representatives, in addition to the votes of their own party-adherents have also received votes from electors belonging to other parties. In this way, it is possible to discover what progress has been achieved by the various Parties. The system of proportional representation has been in force since 1919. During these last thirty years, it is the Social-Democrats which have risen to be the most important Party; in 1919, the number of electors who voted for them amounted to 175,000, whereas in 1947 this figure had risen to 251,600. The Liberals had 215,600 votes in their favour in 1919 and 220,500 in 1947. During the two last elections, however, the Social-Democrats have remained pretty stable, whereas the Liberals obtained 23,000 more votes in the last election. In view of the fact that the electorate has increased during the past four years from 880,000 to 960,000, no advance means retrogression. The Catholic-Conservatives, who form the third most important Party, have also gained another 20,000 votes. The Peasant Party, which comes fourth in importance, and which, together with the three other Parties form the Coalition Government of Switzerland, has also obtained 14,000 more votes. All the other parties have only been able to attract a very small fraction of the voters belonging to the four big Parties.

Although the Liberals are the second most impor-

tant Party, in view of the fact that they possess no fewer than 52 representatives, they have been able to form the largest fraction in Parliament. The Social-Democrats obtained 48 mandates, the Catholic-Conservatives 44 and the Peasants 21. The remaining 29 mandates fall to the six small Parties. The average age of the members is 50. In 1919 there were, however, for the first time, quite a number of younger men elected to the National Council; about one-fifth were between 30 and 39 years of age. In 1947 this younger generation, formed hardly one-tenth of the Council. There is a continual change taking place among the members, about one-third of these elected enjoying Parliamentary honors for the first time. Robert Grimm, of the Social-Democrate Party, is the senior representative, having been an M.P. ever since 1911. Another Social-Democrate, Jacques Schmid, is the second oldest member, having been in Parliament since 1917. In the matter of professions, it is interesting to note that out of the 194 members of the National Council there are only three employees and workers, 15 industrialists and independent merchants, 22 farmers, 7 Doctors and Veterinaries, and 4 architects and engineers. The two largest professional groups are formed by lawyers and notaries, on the one hand, and by officials of Unions, on the other; each comprises 27 members. The two next largest groups are those of the Cantonal Government Councillors of whom there are 23 and of the Municipal and Communal Councillors of whom there are 18. Professors and teachers are represented by 13 mandatories and journalists by 12.

From this it will be seen that Parliament in no way mirrors the prevailing trades and professions in the land. This is quite understandable, as it is not possible for an employee or a business-man to become a member of Parliament, however much he might wish to do so, as he could not afford to give up three months a year to Parliamentary Sessions and another month to Committee Meetings. One peculiarity is not made apparent by the statistics, and this is the fact that so large a number of members exercise several professions. For instance — a well-known Union leader is at the same time a University lecturer, a Veterinary surgeon is also a Councillor in a Cantonal Government, two lawyers are also Professors — in fact, one of them lectures in two different Universities. Five members are required to form a Fraction: at present there are only two M.P.s who are, so to speak, "free-lances" without a Fraction; these are an Evangelist and a former Communist.

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