

Home affairs

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HOME AFFAIRS.

by PIERRE BÉGUIN.

"The Separist Movement in the Jura."

For a few years now, there exists in Switzerland a separatist problem. Fortunately, it is not a question of part of our population wanting to secede from the Mother-Country, in order to unite with another country. No, the matter although very thorny, is infinitely less grave. As a matter of fact, what is happening is that part of a Canton desires to constitute itself into an independent Canton.

At first glance, it might appear paradoxical that a question of this kind should be raised at a time when, it is quite evident, that federalism is losing some of its traditional positions, and centralisation is making constant progress. In other words, it is at the moment when large strata of public opinion are attaching less value to Cantonal sovereignty, that certain of our compatriots are giving so much value to this same sovereignty, that they would like to constitute a twenty-fifth Confederate State.

This phenomenon, however, can be explained. It should be stressed that this separatist problem has arisen within the framework of a bi-lingual Canton, and it is the French-speaking minority that is striving to separate itself from the German-speaking majority. Should the conclusion be drawn from this that there exists in Switzerland, even if it should be in a latent manner, a linguistic conflict, or a question of minorities? For our part, we do not think so. It is precisely federalism, that is to say Cantonal sovereignty which, in spite of everything, remains very real in certain domains, as for instance in the domain of education, and it is this which has prevented any linguistic problem from arising in our country. Had our country been unitary, these happenings in the Canton of Berne could have, eventually, extended to the whole land.

It is very difficult to define to what a degree the aspirations of the Bernese Jurassians towards Cantonal sovereignty, are justified. For our part, we do not think that the German-speaking majority in the Canton of Berne has made any abuse of its power, or has imposed its will on the French-speaking minority, but, perhaps, it has sometimes lacked in psychology and in fact. And that has proved sufficient for the Jurassians to attribute all their difficulties — even those that were the most natural, and the most easily explained as emanating from other causes — to an attitude alleged to be lacking in understanding and even hostile, on the part of the German-speaking majority.

The Jurassian separatists are being very active. Once more, they have held their big Autumn gathering and once more they have managed to assemble a great many participants. Nevertheless, it is quite impossible to ascertain what proportion of the Jurassian population they represent. Anyway, the fact exists that there are also a great many people in the Bernese Jura, who are anti-secessionists, and want to remain within the bosom of Berne.

What would be very interesting to know, is whether the people of the Jura really wish, in their great majority, to separate from the Canton of Berne. There has been some idea, here and there, of organising a plebiscite. But, this the Bernese Government refuses

to permit, alleging — with quite a good deal to support its decision — that the integrity of the Bernese territory cannot be impeached upon, in view of the fact that it is guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. There is talk now in the separatist circles of launching a Federal Initiative, on the occasion of which the Swiss people would be invited to add a twenty-fifth Canton to the existing list, namely the Canton of Jura. But, how could it ever be possible for a Ticinesi, a Genevese or a citizen of Zurich, to take a decision on this subject, if he does not know what is the wish of the people of the Jura themselves? A good Confederate could not possibly, by means of his vote, impose a separation on a small people, who, for their part could very well, on the same day, vote against the separation.

From the foregoing it will be seen that the situation is confused. And, it will remain so for a long time. Meanwhile — and this should be stressed — peace reigns in the Jura, as it does everywhere else in Switzerland. And, that is the essential!

"Regarding a tax which is greatly contested".

As everyone knows, Switzerland is a country in which military service is obligatory. Every man is subject to it, with the exception of those whose health is weak. This is a principle to which we are very attached. We think that it is one of the essential

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characteristics of our democracy, in the sense that our liberties are counter-balanced by duties which are extremely strict.

Under these circumstances, it was only logical to ask from those men who were dispensed from military service, a service of another kind. It was logical to demand from those citizens who are not obliged to give up their time — a relatively large amount of time — to the defence of their country, some other equivalent. And it is this conviction that gave birth to the military tax, which is paid by those men who are dispensed from military service. It does not really bring in so very much to the Treasury, as it only amounts to about a dozen millions per year, whereas our total public expenditure exceeds three thousand million francs. It has therefore a greater significance for those who have to pay it, than for the State which receives it. Its value is more of a symbolical order.

Nevertheless, the manner in which it is levied at present has become definitely unpopular. This is in no way surprising if one stops to think that its modalities date from three-quarters of a century back and that, consequently, it is no longer adapted to present day conditions. It was highly necessary to proceed with a revision. A draft Bill has already been elaborated, and has been submitted to the Cantonal Authorities. It will doubtlessly be dealt with, in a year or two, by the Federal Chambers.

It is not possible for us, within the short space of time allowed for this talk, to examine all the questions of detail to which this subject gives rise. To-day, we will content ourselves with speaking about only one of these, namely that of the taxation of those of our fellow-countrymen who have established themselves abroad.

They left this country for the most divers of reasons: because they had a taste for adventure, because our country is over-populated or because they belong to a profession or trade in which too many

people are already engaged. They have remained attached to their country. Even in those circumstances when they have been obliged for some reason or other to acquire another nationality, they have maintained close ties with their country of origin. The Swiss is faithful by nature. But he is shocked — and quite rightly — when the Swiss Consular Officers in the land of his adoption, ignore him completely except when it is a matter of demanding from him his military tax, accompanied by contentions and administrative complications, which are the unfailing adjuncts of the levying of taxes.

The other day, the Grand Council of Vaud, convened to take part in a pre-consultative session, occupied itself with the case of Swiss citizens abroad. It expressed the wish that they would only be liable to the military tax until the age of forty, that is to say, to the age up to which the men who have remained in the Motherland are liable to effective military service. This is a modest demand, but it indicates that, for the first time, a constituent authority in our country has made a gesture in their favour. This proves that the question is ripening and that, sooner or later, justice will be done in regard to the claims put forward by the Swiss abroad.

In this connection, it would appear desirable to make known a wish that was put forward by these Swiss, on the occasion of their last Congress. They suggested that they should be liable to a small taxation, but that the yield from it should not be affected to national defence, but should, on the contrary, be placed in a Mutual Aid Fund, which would make it possible to come to the aid of those Swiss who have returned to their own country and whose fate, more particularly when a war or a natural catastrophe has robbed them of all they possessed, is far from enviable.

Such a solution would, indeed, be a happy one. We feel sure that more and more people in Switzerland will give it their support.



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