

Home Affairs

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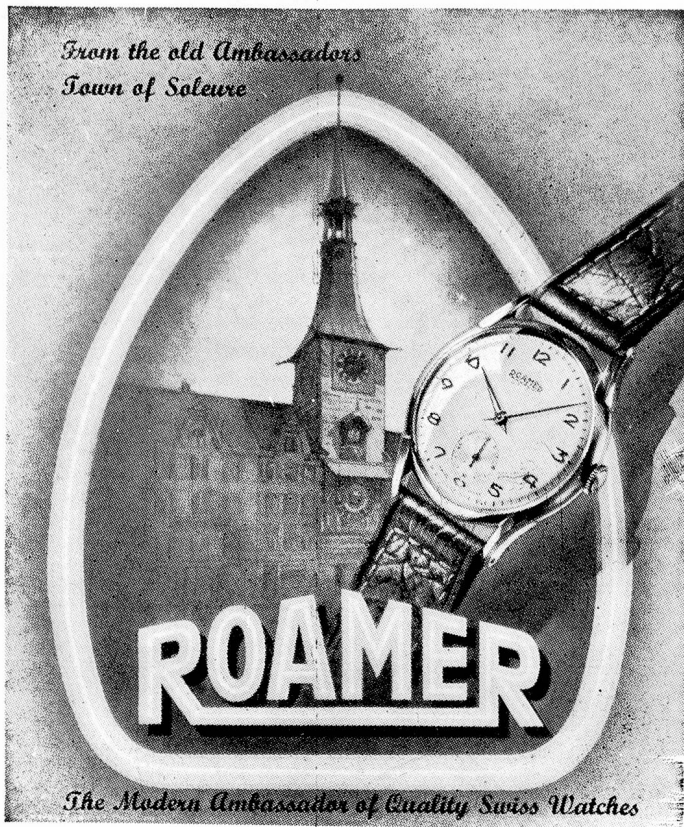
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HOME AFFAIRS.

by MAX NEF.

(Swiss Initiatives and Referendums).

The Initiative, or the Popular Referendum, as this institution is also called, gives the Swiss citizen the right to put into motion suggestions regarding any change or modification of the Federal Constitution. For this purpose, it is necessary to obtain first the signatures of at least 50,000 Swiss citizens possessing a voting power, after which a Popular Referendum is ordered, inasmuch as the Initiative is put forward in accordance with the forms prescribed in the Law and the Constitution.

Recently, both the Swiss Authorities and the public have occupied themselves repeatedly with an Initiative which has become known under the name of its initiator and is called the Chevalier Initiative. Only a few days ago, the Federal Council submitted a supplementary Report on this Initiative, for the consideration of the Federal Chambers. The enquiries undertaken in this matter by the Federal Council and its Departments culminate in an extremely unusual proposal, namely that this Initiative should be declared invalid in view of the fact that the demands put forward in it are practically unrealisable, and that, therefore, it should not be subjected to a Popular Referendum. The decision regarding this Proposal of the Federal Council, lies with Parliament, which will have to deal with this matter during the next Sessions.

Already the fact that this Initiative is lacking in certain forms of procedure raises a doubt as to whether this in itself might not prove a reason for its invalidity, prohibiting it from being submitted to a Popular Referendum. It is possible also that political and psychological considerations have caused the Federal Council to be influenced by the absence of the proper forms of procedure. This all the more so as, on the basis of a careful examination of the subject, it would appear that the claims put forward in the Initiative cannot be realised in an objective manner and, for this reason alone, a Popular Referendum cannot logically come into question.

It is true that, in accordance with the traditional custom there are limitations to the purport of such demands on the part of the people. It remains for the persons who put forward the proposals, and ultimately for the Swiss people themselves to decide what matter is suitable for inclusion into the Federal Constitution. When, however, as in the present case, one knows already beforehand that an Initiative, even if it is approved by the people, cannot be carried out in practice, then it would be carrying respect for the rights of the people to an extreme point, were such an Initiative presented for voting, in spite of everything.

The object of the Chevalier Initiative is a popular one, in that it puts forward the demand for a reduction in military expenditure. But, this demand is presented in respect of the Federal Budget for 1955, or failing that for 1956. By this alone the initiators have made a big mistake in regard to the time limit required. Not only the fact of having to conform to legally prescribed terms, but even the mere carrying out of such a resolution for the cutting of expenditure,

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would prove quite impossible in practice at this point, in so far as the 1956 Budget is concerned.

A further obstacle resides in the fact that the initiators of this project demand a 50 per cent cut in military expenditure, the measure to be carried out in one full swoop and in a single budgetary year. A glance at the expenditure structure shows that it is impossible to cut expenditure by half, in view of the fact that there exist a whole series of fixed costs, such as arise out of the maintenance of military establishments and equipment, fortifications, weapons and army equipment, all of which cannot be changed in an arbitrary manner. Almost one-third of the total expenditure is in respect of the personnel of the Military Administration. For reasons, both of a legal as well as of a social character, it is impossible to engage people for a year or to dismiss them within a year — for not valid reason in these services. The compensation due to a prematurely dismissed innocent person, as prescribed by the Law, would come to much more than the amount saved in salaries. A further item of expenditure concerns long term delivery obligations from industry and trade, from which the State could not draw back, one-sidedly, without having to pay adequate compensation, which would again do away with a very considerable part of the economies.

These few facts have been put forward in the hope that they may serve to spare the Authorities from the accusation that they do not wish to economise. The way to economy proposed by the Initiative, however, would be a wrong way, which could never lead to the desired aim. In all these discussions regarding the problem of cutting down expenditure, there is one thing that must never be forgotten, and that is that Switzerland, as a permanently neutral country, has undertaken the international obligation to defend her independence with her own armed forces and the means at her disposal. Under present circumstances, to build up an Army which is really fit for service in war, and to maintain it at a high level in regard to training and equipment, represents such costs that the Authorities are obliged, whenever decisions are taken in the domain of military National Defence, to give careful consideration to the economic aspect and the financial efficiency of the measures in question. However, it can, and must, be stated with a clear conscience that they are fully conscious of this duty which is incumbent upon them and that they live up to their obligations.

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