

Swiss spotlight

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1958)**

Heft 1321

PDF erstellt am: **17.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689816>

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SWISS SPOTLIGHT.

By PIERRE BÉGUIN.

“Switzerland now has a fiscal régime for the next six years”.

The Swiss people have approved by 420,000 as against 350,000 votes, *i.e.* by a somewhat feeble majority, a modification of the fiscal régime, which had been proposed to them by their authorities. This project brings nothing new with it and has been conceived as a pure and simple easing of the fiscal charges. It is not a fundamental reform of the financial statute of the Confederation. It is, in point of fact, an arrangement of the legislation in force, which will be valid for a period of only six years. Before the end of the financial year 1964 it will be necessary to re-examine the whole problem.

Experience has shown that, in our country at any rate, it is impossible to set down in the Federal Constitution any definite list of the taxes which the Central State is authorised to levy. However, each time that the Swiss people are asked to approve a transitory solution they consent to do so. They do this more or less willingly, but they do it all the same. This, because the Swiss citizens are hostile to any financial venture and they are determined that under no pretext shall any disorder find place in the “housekeeping” of the State. This reflex has occurred once again. The people, without any enthusiasm, have approved the fiscal project submitted to them.

The solution advocated by the Government and by the two Houses was opposed from both sides. The Socialists, with the support of the trade unionists and the co-operators, criticised the official project for the un-equitable manner — in their opinion — in which are distributed the fiscal alleviations permitted by the present flourishing financial situation of the State. According to their views, only the small consumers and those persons who belong to the lower and medium income brackets should have been favoured in this way. They stressed the fact that the owners of large fortunes and people with large incomes also benefited from the measures that were advocated. What they did, as a matter of fact, was to exploit *envy*, by drawing attention to the fact that if the simple worker could expect to be better off by from 50 to 100 francs per

annum, the rich man would save between 500 and 1,000 francs.

These arguments undoubtedly had an influence, which explains the negative votes obtained in certain Cantons. In general, however, each citizen only considered his personal interests. He did not refuse the gift which was being offered him, and gave his sanction to a fiscal exoneration from which he would benefit, even if this were only on a modest scale. Quite certainly, his voting was based on arithmetical realism.

Another opposition showed itself, however: that on the part of the Federalists. These affirmed that the fiscal alleviations could have been still greater and that, above all, it should have proved possible to restore to the Cantons their monopoly of direct taxation. In this way — so they said — the Cantons, the financial situation of which is less favourable than that of the Confederation, while their tasks are more numerous and more onerous, could have once more become political corporations capable of existing by their own means, of creating new institutions and of perfecting those for which they are already responsible. This opposition, however, did not find any response and did not play any determining role. For one thing, the poorest among the Cantons have a tendency, which grows more and more marked, to look for their salvation to the subsidies granted by the Central State. For another thing, the realistic argument, the attitude taken by each individual citizen tempted by the prospect of fiscal exoneration, proved stronger in the balance than any political considerations.

This is perhaps to be regretted. The policy of a country is not directed in the same manner as the administration of a private enterprise; it would appear to be somewhat disquieting that material arguments should prove to be so much stronger than political ideas. The internal balance of Switzerland is constituted by a skilful adjustment made between the attributions of the Confederation on the one hand, and the autonomy of the Cantons and Communes on the other. Should federalism become attenuated, our political régime would change its face. But it is not certain whether a new régime would make possible an equilibrium as finely graded as the one which we have known up to the present.

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