

Tasks in the technical age

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TASKS IN THE TECHNICAL AGE

Federal Councillor Tschudi, head of the Department of Home Affairs, gave an address to the association of graduates of the Federal University of Technology (ETH). He began by asserting that scientific co-operation amongst the universities in Switzerland was positive and fruitful. He then sketched the problems which had arisen from precipitant technical development and consequent change of conditions. The Cantons which had their own universities found it increasingly difficult to procure the necessary financial means for their upkeep, and that in turn brought the danger that we could not keep up with worldwide technical progress. The Confederation was therefore obliged to help and to support research, though our efforts should be devoted not only to the creation of training and research facilities, but also to securing a steady influx from as yet unexhausted reserves in the working classes and agriculture. The Federal Councillor also pointed out the difficulties of local, regional and national planning. Switzerland, he said, could easily accommodate twice its present population with rational use of the land.

He referred to the rapidity with which new scientific inventions and discoveries became available in everyday life. This trend had been expedited by the two wars which, unhappily, had also brought the reverse side of the medal into relief with all its havoc and destruction. And now the splitting of the atom had become a burning preoccupation for mankind.

Federal Councillor Tschudi agreed that it was not easy for a small state to keep in step with scientific development. It would be stupidity to try and imitate the big powers — we would soon be out of breath in such a race. But it was equally wrong to sit back resignedly, saying we were too weak to participate in scientific progress. In our economic set-up it was left to industry to further applied research, and the State could be of help in the co-ordination within the various establishments. In basic research, however, it was up to the community to finance it. In our Federal State it was essential for the Cantons to remain autonomous, also in educational matters, and it was the duty of the State to see that the cantonal universities, too, could keep their autonomy. The Confederation gave subsidies to the universities, then they allowed special credits for atomic energy research, and thirdly the National Fund for Scientific Research had been started ten years ago. The Federal Council had asked Parliament to increase it to 23 million francs a year. At present, commissions of experts were examining how much more the Confederation should help the cantonal universities.

At the same time, Federal Councillor Tschudi continued, the Confederation did not forget or neglect the ETH (Federal University of Technology). In 1940, 206 professors and lecturers had worked there, in 1961 already 454. The number of other employees at the ETH had grown from 358 to 1,257. Within twenty-one years the gross expenditure had increased from 4.7 million to 43 million francs. He explained that, in addition, the Confederation also participated in several important inter-

national research organisations and supported a number of private scientific institutions.

One of the efforts which must be maintained was to eliminate the social injustice that not all capable youngsters were yet able to study because their parents lacked the necessary means. This proved also an economic disadvantage for our country. As the Cantons were unable to award sufficient scholarships the Confederation would be empowered by means of an additional article to the Constitution to subsidise the cantonal scholarships.

The rapid evolution of science and technology had brought numerous obligations to the Confederation in the field of teaching and research. The Cantons should not be limited in their rights or relieved of any duties — the assistance by the Confederation should be of a supplementary and complementary nature.

The problems of land planning were of some magnitude. Lack of ground meant danger of speculation, the waterways and lakes suffered from pollution, and even the air was becoming unhealthy in places; the natural beauties of the countryside were threatened, recreational space was diminishing; historic and cultural monuments were injured, even destroyed; technology endangered the basic requirements of physical and mental health. Yet it would be wrong to hamper development — the whole was a problem of planning, not forgetting agricultural needs. The Cantons and Communes had to be convinced that good planning was essential to prevent deliberate exploitation of the ground.

Next Federal Councillor Tschudi referred to the problem of the militia system and technology. Was it possible, he asked, for a militia recruit to master the handling of complicated weapons and instruments in the inevitably rather short period of initial training ("Rekrutenschule" 17 weeks)? "It speaks well for our young people", he said, "that experts affirm this question unhesitatingly." A matter for concern was rather the financial burden imposed by the purchase and upkeep of electronic instruments, rockets, planes and vehicles. Could our country with its five million inhabitants keep in step without neglecting other tasks vital to our future? Our policy of neutrality presupposed an effective defence which did not involve us in financial adventures. Engineers and technical experts had a great responsibility in advising the authorities on the shaping and organising of the army.

The Federal Councillor stressed the Swiss point of view regarding the question of European integration, and then ended his speech by warning the scientist who, if wrapped up in his special subject neglected the implications of his research, failed to be a full citizen and a responsible member of the community. Due to his special knowledge and experience he was expected to co-operate in the solution of the big problems which were facing the country.

Mariann.

(Based on ATS report.)