

Switzerland and the council of Europe

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SWITZERLAND AND THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

On 2nd November 1962 the Swiss Foreign Minister, Federal Councillor Wahlen, handed the Federal Council's report on Switzerland's relation with the Council of Europe to the parliamentary press. Its findings were positive.

The Council of Europe consists at present of sixteen member countries. Its aims are to further ideals and principles which form their common heritage and to further their economic and social progress. It has no legislative or political powers. There are no limits to its activities except that nothing may hinder participation in the work of United Nations or other international organisation to which a member country is committed, and any question of defence lies outside its competence. Its organs are the Committee of Ministers as well as the Consultative Assembly, a forum for the exchange of public opinion. At present, 138 members belong to the Assembly. It was Sir Winston Churchill who, in his famous speech in Zurich on 19th September 1946, sowed the seed of this organisation which was founded in 1949.

Since its conception the Council of Europe has turned more and more to questions of European integration, to intensification of co-operation in cultural, legal and social fields, as well as to the realm of public hygiene. The debates cover increasingly questions and subjects of immediate interest and importance to Switzerland. The question whether Switzerland should join has cropped up on several occasions in the past, but it was felt that the time was not yet ripe. Gradually, however, Switzerland started to co-operate with the Council by joining committees of experts and by administering international conventions.

In 1957, five Swiss parliamentarians attended a meeting in Paris, as private individuals but with the Federal Council's approval. In 1959, the Secretary-General invited Switzerland to send a permanent observer. This invitation was accepted by Parliament in 1960. Six observers and six deputy observers were elected, and Federal Councillors repeatedly took part in meetings of Ministers.

As early as 1957, the Federal Council realised that Switzerland's neutrality was no obstacle to joining the Council of Europe. It was no supranational institution which could in any way be prejudicial to a member country's sovereignty. The Council is an important meeting place of the six countries of the Rome Convention (EEC) and the other members of the Strasbourg organisation. Financially, too, the Federal Council considered the membership fees within Switzerland's reach. Levied according to the number of inhabitants, as is customary,

they would amount to less than half a million francs per annum.

In its report the Federal Council stated that Switzerland had benefited for years from valuable experiences collected in Strasbourg by the members and considered that it should no longer remain in this position without contributing towards the cost of the organisation. There were some points which demanded special scrutiny, for instance, the Federal Constitution does not grant women the vote; it also bans the Order of the Jesuits and its affiliated societies, nor does it allow the foundation of new religious orders. But it was found that these and other points were compatible with the Statute of the Council of Europe, and the Federal Council recommended to Parliament acceptance of the proposal to apply for membership, which it did on 11th December last with 142 to 15 votes (Council of States 32 to 7). "The Times" reported the next day:

COUNCIL OF EUROPE MOVE BY SWISS

"The Swiss Lower House today approved by a large majority a Federal Government proposal that Switzerland should join the Council of Europe. All parties except the communists, who have only three members in the House, were in favour. Party leaders spoke of the advantages that could come from membership."

A month later the Federal Political Department announced that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe had decided unanimously to invite Switzerland to join. This decision was taken after consultation with the Assembly on 17th December 1962. The Federal Council answered this invitation, expressing satisfaction that new ties should be forged and that new ways of international co-operation on a European level should be opened.

On 22nd January, the Federal Council issued a message to Parliament recommending acceptance of the Statute of the Council of Europe by a decree consisting of a single article. Switzerland's joining of the Council will be confirmed by the depositing of a deed at the Office of the Secretary-General in Strasbourg in which Switzerland declares its willingness to acknowledge the aims and objects of the Council. The Federal Assembly will have to elect the six members and their deputies. The representative of Switzerland on the Committee of Ministers will be the Swiss Foreign Minister, Federal Councillor Wahlen.

(Based partly on news received from the "Agence Télégraphique Suisse".)