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The Swiss Observer

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EDITED BY MRS. MARIANN MEIER WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF MEMBERS OF THE SWISS COLONY IN GREAT BRITAIN

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THUNDER IN PARLIAMENT

As has already reported, the extraordinary session of the Swiss Parliament in February was concerned with the measures to combat inflation. The spring session in March started off with the controversial revision of the federal law on sickness and accident insurance. Three years it took to reach a compromise, for there was tremendous opposition from the medical profession, from the Swiss sickness benefit societies (Krankenkassen) and the chiropractitioners. According to the finally accepted revision the sickness benefit societies and the patients will be better off.

An important decision was taken regarding the fifteen Swiss schools abroad. The basis has now been created for supporting not only primary and secondary education but also advanced training and instruction. (The College of the Swiss Mercantile Society in London does not come into this category, as it provides vocational education.)

Legislation regarding shorter working hours was also dealt with in the spring session. The initiative for a 44-hour week had been withdrawn. A 46-hour week has now been established, and the Federal Council may (from 1st January 1968) reduce this to 45 if the economic and the labour position allows it.

The summer session in June was one of the liveliest on record. The annual report of the Federal Council was debated and accepted together with the accounts of the Swiss Federal Railways. There was considerable suggestion of tightening up supervision on administration, which is the responsibility of Parliament. A credit of 25.8 million francs for extending and enlarging the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH) was granted, so were small increases of expense allowances to M.P.s.

An extensive debate took place on the sale of milk. It will now no longer be necessary to get special permission for selling pasteurised, uperised and sterilised milk in bottles or plastic containers.

By far the most important and lively debate concerned the "Mirage Affair". "The Times" reported as follows on 10th June:

SWISS ALARM OVER FIGHTER COSTS

"The affair of the Mirage fighters was the only item today on the agenda of the Lower House of the Swiss Parliament.

"In 1961 Parliament approved a credit of roughly £74m. for the purchase from France of 100 Mirage fighters. Last April the Federal Government asked Parliament for a grant of a further £48m. as, in the meantime, the construction costs had increased and some improvements in the electronic equipment had to be made. The size of this additional amount caused an unfavourable reaction

throughout the country. The federal services concerned were openly accused of inefficiency.

"A committee of experts, after studying the question, stated yesterday that in 1961 the expenses involved were miscalculated, and even the additional expenses now under discussion were inaccurate."

Forty-five speakers took part in the eleven-hour debate regarding the additional 576 million francs to the original credit of 871 million francs. The Head of the Federal Military Department, Federal Councillor Chaudet, wound up the debate with a 75-minute speech.

The whole affair was given much publicity already long before the debate. The "Schweizerisches Kaufmännisches Zentralblatt" wrote on 1st May:

"Einen harten Brocken aus der Küche des Eidgenössischen Militärdepartementes versucht gegenwärtig der Bundesrat den eidgenössischen Räten und der Öffentlichkeit verdaulich zuzubereiten."

The "Basler Nachrichten" said "Courage has broken out in Parliament", when the Mirage business strengthened the resolution of M.P.s also in other matters. "Mirage Thunder in Parliament", "Mirage Quake" were headlines in the Swiss press. The "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" talked of a "Bitter Pill", and the "Luzerner Tagblatt" called it "The Big Malaise". Peter Duerrenmatt in the "Basler Nachrichten" compared the Mirage Debate favourably with that of the economic boom three months earlier when there was such a variety of opinions in the House that the lead had to be left to the Federal Council. This time, throughout from Right to Left, there was remarkable unanimity. Objectivity triumphed over Party politics.

Parliament showed its determination to tighten the reins, and with 156 to 3 votes accepted a proposal that the debate be interrupted until a special commission of twenty members of all Parties had held an extensive enquiry into the whole matter.

But no doubt, the Mirage shock has had salutary effects. The Editor of the "Schweizerisches Kaufmännisches Zentralblatt, Richard Buss, said:

"The Swiss citizen's trust in and direct contact with Parliament, which has not always been at its best in recent years, have been strengthened . . . Parliament and Press have treated the Chief of the Military Department most loyally. A scandal which anywhere else abroad would have led to a government crisis, merely released a cleansing thunderstorm. This is quite in accordance with the political conception of the Swiss citizen who has fared well so far with his inclination towards stability."

(Also based on news received from A.T.S.)