

A survey of the Swiss political scene

Autor(en): **Weitnauer, Albert**

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A SURVEY OF THE SWISS POLITICAL SCENE

Dr. Albert Weitnauer speaks to the Anglo-Swiss Society

On surveying the Swiss political scene, one immediately notices that it is fraught with problems to a very unusual extent. It is no exaggeration to say, I think, that Switzerland as a country now has a full measure of them, both on the domestic and external front. Obviously, the Swiss being very assiduous and busy people, as we all know, always accepted more than their full share of all kinds of activities in every walk of life. But this was their own private affair and had only indirectly to do with the role of Switzerland and the Swiss Government in the world at large.

What is new is the fact that very momentous problems whose importance has grown continuously over the last few years—domestic problems, European problems, world-wide problems—are facing us and cannot be disregarded any longer with a mere reference to the old adage that they can be left to take care of themselves and will thus be solved in due course without any particular effort being required of the Swiss authorities and the Swiss people. We are confronted, in other words, with a number of challenges to which we have to respond.

The price of prosperity

Let me first turn to the domestic scene. Here, our main problem, strange though it may sound, is our enormous economic prosperity. The Swiss economy has developed by leaps and bounds over the last quarter of a century at an unheard-of rate. The gross national product, totalling only 37,000 million Swiss francs in 1960, had risen to 81,000 million Swiss francs in 1969. Unemployment—the big problem of the thirties when the number of unemployed had risen to more than 200,000—has been practically non-existent over the last 30 years. So we had, to give you a figure, only 139 jobless workers at the end of February of this year. Swiss industrial production, having expanded considerably over the same period, made it necessary to employ more and more foreign workers

—coming mostly from the Mediterranean countries (Italy in particular)—whose number had reached the impressive figure of about 750,000 to 800,000 in the early sixties. Inflation, which was no problem in the early stages of our post-war economic development—i.e. till about 1960—began to rear its ugly head soon after and has—with qualifications—been with us ever since.

To cope with the problems arising from this overwhelming prosperity and a consequently overheated economy was not an easy task for the Swiss Government, the more so since it was a new problem. We were caught up—and are still being caught up—in the difficulties stemming from the necessity to put on the brakes just about everywhere. Let us take the example of foreign labour once more. It was obvious that the influx of foreign workers had to be stopped most urgently in the early sixties when one out of four—or in some industries one out of two or three—workers had come in from abroad. It had to be done simply for reasons of national policy. The same situation still prevailing now, since of Switzerland's six million inhabitants about one million are foreigners (workmen and other foreign residents), the same restrictive measures, applied even more strictly, have to be maintained. On the other hand, it was very obvious that, the total number of working people being limited, labour became a commodity in extremely short supply, very much in demand for evident reasons. That is why over the last years inflation in Switzerland has been to a large extent, although by no means exclusively, wage inflation.

The inflation rate, after having reached a level just short of 5% at the beginning of the sixties, had by 1967-68 come down to a rate which appears almost normal today—of about 2.5%. But as a consequence of a new wave, which was setting in two or three years ago, inflation has now reached about 6½%, a figure which in particular the older generation in our country considers almost unbelievable.

Switzerland's outside dependance

Here, an element comes in which is very typical of present day conditions, and this is the close inter-relation between seemingly purely domestic problems and the fact that what happens in Switzerland can in no way be any longer dissociated from what happens in the world outside. Take again the problem of foreign workers. It was all very well to bring them in and employ them in ever increasing numbers. But it could not possibly be expected that the governments of the countries from which they came would not take an active interest in how they were faring in Switzerland. Repeatedly, negotiations had to be conducted with these governments which turned out to be more and more difficult. On the other hand popular sentiment has not remained unaffected by the many problems created by the presence of roughly one million foreigners on our soil whose assimilation poses a real problem. These sentiments cannot be described, I think, as xenophobia, since, as a country situated in the very centre of Europe, we are used to foreign contacts, we have some knowledge of foreign languages and are, by and large, quite prepared to get along with our guests from abroad who have contributed so very considerably to our growing wealth. Still, a feeling of uneasiness in some parts of the Swiss population about this large mass of foreigners led to the famous Schwarzenbach initiative, whose aim it was to reduce the total number of foreign workers to about half a million. This initiative was rejected in a popular vote in June of last year by a narrow margin. A new, very similar initiative, although not patronised by Mr. Schwarzenbach this time, seems to be in preparation at this very moment. It is evident that our European neighbours are watching these developments with keen interest, viewing them in the larger context of our foreign relations in general.

Inflation is both a national and an international problem. Almost every industrial country in the world seems to have caught the bug, and each one

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is exporting the disease to its partners. International action is very obviously called for to really master it. The best brains the world can muster in this field have been at work for quite some time to find the magic formula. To my mind, more than just intellectual ingenuity and theoretical knowledge, immense as it may be, is required to come to grips with this problem. What is needed is the political will of the governments on the one hand, but also an urgent and persistent desire on the part of the population to get rid of inflation and, consequently, a preparedness to make real sacrifices to achieve this aim. As far as the Swiss people are concerned, I should like to think that they are still ready—despite the lure of what modern consumer society has to offer them—to shoulder their part of the burden.

Neutrality today

This definitely leads me to comment in a few words on the problems we are faced with in the field of our external relations. How could I possibly not start off with Swiss neutrality? Despite our growing international responsibilities we feel that this our traditional policy is by no means outdated, quite the contrary. We have the impression that in a world where co-operation between all countries is recognised more and more as not only desirable but indispensable, neutrality has acquired a new and, perhaps enhanced meaning. I would not say that the time is past when political blocks were facing each other in Europe. But still there is a growing awareness that some kind of European system will have to be restored in the long run, comprising both parts of our continent, East and West. In such a context, the existence of neutral countries such as Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland not only is not an obstacle but is definitely a positive factor. As regards

Swiss neutrality in particular, it has become, over the centuries, an institution of international public law and international life. It plays its useful part not only in Europe, but in the world at large. Nobody would gain anything by our giving it up, and all would stand to lose, in my opinion, if ever it should occur to us—I hasten to say that this is not the case—to depart from this solid foundation of our very existence in the family of nations.

But it is equally true that neutrality is not tantamount to aloofness, to a standing apart from developments taking place and efforts being made all around us, aimed at the creation of a better and more peaceful world.

A former Swiss Foreign Minister, Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre, coined the slogan "Neutrality and Solidarity" as the guideline for Swiss foreign policy. Perhaps we can go a step further now and replace "solidarity" by "participation". And this is indeed the direction in which both our fundamental ideals and our enlightened self interest lead us. It is a fact that we have not joined the United Nations yet, and I do not think the majority of the Swiss people—who would have to vote on any such issue—feel that the moment has come to adhere to the UN as a full member. It is certainly also true, however, that in accordance with typically Swiss pragmatism we have been, since the UN Organisation was founded, participating more and more in the work of its specialised agencies covering almost every aspect of human endeavour. The UN has responded to Switzerland's attitude with sympathy and a large measure of understanding.

Involvement with world organisations

The European headquarters of the UN were established in Geneva right from the beginning. Quite a few outstanding Swiss citizens have lent their services to the UN to accomplish tasks important to the world as a whole. May I recall here e.g. that two Swiss ambassadors, Mr. August Lindt and Mr. Felix Schynder, have occupied with distinction the very responsible position of UN High Commissioner for Refugees. These are just two examples: I could mention others. But I would not like to conceal from you that despite this impressive record we are not quite certain exactly what help we can be to the community of nations in the future. This question is asked, with a sense of great urgency, by our young people in particular. We obviously still have the International Committee of the Red Cross to point to as a Swiss institution of world wide renown. Still, it is certainly advisable to develop new forms of Swiss participation, humanitarian and otherwise, in the realm of international relations outside the economic field.

In this field indeed—trade relations with the outside world—active co-operation is for Switzerland a matter of long and time honoured tradi-

tion. The necessity to sell the products of our industry to all the four corners of the earth grew out of the fundamentals of our existence. We are a landlocked country, with no raw materials whatever, and, at our disposal, just the assiduity and ingenuity of our population. To look at Swiss trade statistics is quite impressive. With total trade—imports and exports together—of almost 50,000 million Swiss francs in 1970, Switzerland ranks twelfth (in absolute figures) among the roughly 130 nations of this world, outdistancing countries like China, Australia, Brazil and others. Our foreign trade amounts to almost one half of that of the Soviet Union, still in absolute figures.

Furthermore, Switzerland is a world trading nation par excellence. About 40% of our total exports go to extra European countries, among which the developing nations are of outstanding importance. This alone—quite apart from our genuine will to help those newly emerging nations—would justify our interest in the problem of development aid. We also participated very actively in the building up of the world trading system between highly developed nations, which the GATT Organisation—located in Geneva since 1947—and its famous tariff and trade conferences stand for. After the Kennedy-Round—the most important of them all—had been successfully concluded in 1967, a real crisis has arisen with rampant protectionism in America and an ever increasing tension between the European communities and the United States. In view of the enormous stake Switzerland has in international trade, we are watching events in this field with great attention and considerable concern. Just like Great Britain, a world trading nation as we are, we feel that much would be lost if the proud edifice of liberal world trade, erected with such painstaking care over almost a quarter of a century, were to collapse.

Joining Europe

All this should not, however, distract us from giving our most acute attention to the European scene. Here we are wholeheartedly with our British friends in the hope that the enlargement of the European Communities, with the participation of the United Kingdom as a full member, will soon become a reality. We are convinced that Great Britain has many things to offer Europe: its vast experience in the field of trade and finance, the outstanding achievements of British craftsmanship and technological research and—last but not least—its very potent import market. That Britain stands to profit also by participating in the European Communities has been repeatedly and eloquently stressed by responsible British statesmen. But the political significance of Britain's joining the European Communities certainly overshadows all other considerations. British entry will make for a stabler and stronger Western European Com-

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munity, better prepared to make Europe's voice heard in the concert of nations.

Switzerland's objective is more modest but still important—not only to us—but, we would like to feel, also to our European partners. Conscious of our traditional policy of neutrality, we could neither claim, nor are we expected to claim, full membership of the Common Market, its political objectives having been solemnly reasserted over and over again. But it is evident that a country of the economic importance of Switzerland cannot possibly be excluded from a larger European Market in the process of realisation. That this is so, not only for Switzerland but also for the other so-called European "non-candidate countries", was formally recognised by the Heads of States and governments of the Common Market at the Hague conference of December 1969. "Special relations", they said, would have to be established between the enlarged communities and such countries.

The aim is to enable them not only to participate in the free market of the Six, but also—and this above all to maintain free trade between the present EFTA countries, Britain and Switzerland for example, which has so happily developed over the last more than ten years of EFTA's existence. We are confident that an appropriate formula will be found for the shaping of such relations, although we do not delude ourselves as to the many difficult problems which will have to be settled. First of all, obviously, everybody now awaits with impatience the outcome of the British negotiations with the Common Market, since everything will depend on them. They have entered a decisive phase and are nearing the moment of truth. I remain confident that all will end well. The main reason for my optimism is that in this shrinking world of ours it would seem anachronistic that Europe should forgo the benefits of a large duty free market and the merging of its resources which correspond so very obviously to the imperatives of modern times.

The British example

Let me end by going back to where I started from. I said that we are faced with a number of challenges which, to a certain extent, are quite new to us. If any proof of this was needed it would have been supplied by the aeroplane hi-jackings of last September and the subsequent Jordanian War. Through these events, Switzerland was in a way catapulted into world politics. Much to the surprise of some of us we suddenly discovered that there are no "non participants" in world history. In some ways it was quite a blow to us, but a salutary one. We are now going through a process of adjustment to this new kind of reality. We realise that the world has become one for us too. We can no longer neglect to follow with the keenest attention political events in all parts of the world.

The Zerqa episode also clearly brought out something which has a direct bearing on Swiss-British relations. Dealing with the problem we then had in common showed us the absolute perfection with which British diplomacy operates under such circumstances. I think I am not offending anybody when I say that our British friends were by far the best informed of all countries involved in this situation. Their handling of the incident was masterly, and we learnt a lot from them.

This is, as we all know, not the first time that Britain and Switzerland have co-operated. They are now joined in EFTA, much to their mutual advantage. Looking back in history, the United Kingdom has more than once been of decisive importance in assuring the well being and sometimes the very survival of our country. A mere reference to the events of 1847-48 may suffice to show what I mean, when Britain, under Lord Palmerston's firm leadership, acted as a most effective protector of our fledgling new democratic constitution.

So it is a proud heritage of cloudless relations that the two countries have to defend. There is no doubt in my mind that this is very much worth while.

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