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COMMENT

YET ANOTHER AIRPORT?

The Transport Office of Canton Berne has recently published its plans for Grand Marais Airport. This airport would stretch inside a rectangle formed by the villages of Treiten, Siselen, Fraeschels and Kallnach, and lie off the future Berne-Murten-Yverdon motorway.

Although the scheme is in an advanced planning stage, it may hopefully be cancelled by two motions which are to be tabled at the May session of the Berne Great Council by delegates firmly opposed to the idea of a Bernese European Airport. Grand Marais Airport is planned to have a 2,500 metre main runway, and a 1971 cost estimate put the expenditure at about 50 million francs, not counting the purchase of land. A picture recently published by the *Schweizer Illustrierter* showed the gash that such an airport would make on the rich countryside north east of Lake Murten. This predominantly agricultural and sparsely populated zone would be irredeemably spoilt by a project of this magnitude.

The awareness of pollution and conservation occasionally leads to extreme reactions. People are so well groomed on these matters nowadays and read so many prophecies of doom in magazines that they get hysterical whenever they see a whiff of smoke. All must be put into proportion. When the Confederation decided back in 1945 that Switzerland should have an airport at Berne, besides those at

Basle, Zurich and Geneva, the problems of noise and pollution hardly required to be reckoned with. The scarcity of traffic, the smallness of the planes in use at the time didn't pose a serious threat to the quality of life of those people living in an airport's zone of influence.

Therefore, plans laid down in 1945 cannot be valid today without revision. It is no argument to canvass for a Bernese airport because it had been planned 27 years ago. The out-datedness of the original scheme was realised several years ago, when it became obvious that Belpoos airstrip couldn't possibly be promoted to a European airport.

Before conservation became firmly grounded in western minds, there may have been ardent local supporters of a Bernese airport. The reasons were more emotional than practical. An airport being a symbol of importance, it may seem odd that Berne should be the only European capital not even equipped with a continental airport. But these considerations appear as trifling. The point is whether Switzerland actually requires another airport. She already has two inter-continental ones for only six million inhabitants. Britain has three (Gatwick, Heathrow and Manchester) for a population of 50 million. So there can be no denying that Switzerland is well purveyed in airports. Admittedly, Zurich and Geneva airports will be saturated in the foreseeable future. But one has to put a stop on unbridled expansion, or else allow the whole cramped Plateau to be strewn with airports. Insisting on a second European airport (Basle-Mulhouse is already firmly established in this role) would also be a lack of foresight, because the future belongs to helicopter, vertical and short take-off aircraft requiring limited ground infrastructure.

Planners estimate that Grand Marais Airport would have 200,000 passengers a year by 1985. But planners are the slaves of forecasts which project various trends, as though the evolution of air travel is inexorable and uncontrollable. The mess to the countryside which such an airport would cause, as amply proved by the aerial photographs published in the *Schweizer Illustrierte*, is a reason strong enough to compel these 200,000 people to take the train.

Although the recourse to small planes, however extensive, appears to be uneconomical and unable to satisfy demand in the long run, one may ask why no more emphasis is placed on this form of transport at present. Instead of having "Airbus" and "DC-9" jets landing at Grand Marais, it is more forthcoming to have "Pilatus" or small jets landing at Belpmoos, which lies much nearer anyway to the capital. Dozens of towns in Switzerland have

airstrips which could be modernised at little cost to handle the regular flights of smaller aircraft. A federal official on his way back from Washington would hop from Cointrin to Belpmoos in a small jet, instead of making the journey to Grand Marais in a half empty DC-9.

The most ready answer, as far as Berne is concerned, is to connect main airports to the railway network. This is presently being done at Kloten. The changes from a main line station to an airport terminal, a long wait for a coach to the airport, all time consuming stages of modern air transport, could be removed by servicing airports by the railways. This solution has fortunately been chosen.

Opposition to Grand Marais Airport will doubtless be strong enough to shelve the project indefinitely. The peaceful villagers most directly concerned will rise up in anger, as they did at the quaint parish of Cublington, when the boffins of Whitehall set about wrecking half of Buckinghamshire in endowing London with a third airport. Naturally, the magnitude of the problems raised by London's third airport are of another order. A "city of a hundred thousand people" won't have to be erected at Grand Marais, since it is reasonably close to Berne, Biel and Murten. But it would nevertheless spoil the natural heritage of the millions who are huddled on the Swiss Plateau almost as tightly as the peasants of Java.

We need airports—that is sure enough. Yet a choice of priorities must be made. Should we favour an airline's paradise, and tolerate the scream of jets over the Seeland? The communes affected by the Grand Marais project have already decided.

(PMB)

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