

Swiss events

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COMMENT

CONTROVERSY OVER INLAND WATERWAYS

Parliament began its Spring Session with a stormy debate on the future of inland navigation in Switzerland. The issue at stake was to extend the navigable stretches of the Rhine upstream of Basle up to the meeting-point of the Rhine and the Aar, to carry out works on the latter so as to allow barges to be hauled into the Lake of Biel and thence into Lake Neuchatel and up to Yverdon. The project would link the western and French-speaking part of Switzerland with Rotterdam and the North Sea, and would facilitate the economic development of these less industrialised areas.

Over thirty members of the National Council rose to state their position on this controversial and age-old subject. The great majority of the representatives from Western Switzerland were in favour, but there was strong opposition from the Labour (Communist) and Socialist delegates. All the left-wing elements fought the project, and so did the extreme right, among them Schwarzenbach's Independent Republicans. The extreme left and extreme right in Switzerland both stand for the workers but harp on two different sensitive areas of working-class consciousness. The extreme left takes exception to the material inequalities of capitalism whereas the extreme right is incensed by the large number of foreigners. The existence of financial iniquities and of an excessive number of "Gastarbeiter" can both be pegged at big business. The planned trans-helvetian canal will after all serve the interests of big business — a fact which constitutes their principle motivation.

On the other hand, the liberal and conservative parties are generally in favour of developing the upper Rhine's navigability. There is some objection from some cantons bordering the Rhine and the Aar. The Canton of Aarau appears to be the most vocal among them.

The debate took place against a background of growing environmental concern, an issue which is as serious in

Switzerland as anywhere else. It is a well-known fact that Switzerland's usable space, the *Plateau*, is populated to one of the highest densities in the world. Valleys are crammed with railway lines, highways, factories and houses leaving very little space for nature and intensively-farmed land. The problem of "Vital Space" is a very real one in a country in whose lakes of legendary beauty it is often no longer possible to swim.

The argument was carried on every platform. The conservationists, led by "Aqua Viva" an influential organisation, claimed that extending the navigable stretches of the Rhine and the Aar would pollute the whole of Switzerland's inland waterways. They raised the frightening picture of tankers colliding and spilling thousands of tons of crude oil in our lakes and rivers, killing off their fish populations. They also predicted that vast new industrial estates would sprout from the green and marshy banks of the Thiele and Aar totally disfiguring our natural heritage in the name of a philosophy of reckless profit-making and inconsiderate progress whose futility has long been proved" (Aqua Viva statement). Finally, they put forward the argument that the cost of developing Swiss rivers as navigable waterways would never pay and involve a wasteful duplication of the already existing railway network.

The supporters of the scheme retaliate on every point. They produce statistics for the Rhine and the Main showing that fewer than one incident leading to pollution occurs in these rivers every two years. They stress that boats no longer drain off their tanks in open waters. This is now carried out in ports by specialised firms equipped in consequence. They say that a large canal-tanker is less polluting and noisy than two 60-wagon trains or 60 road-tankers with trailers carrying the equivalent amount of oil. As another argument, they point out that extending the Swiss railway and road network in order to accommodate more traffic conduces to the daily disappearance of farms and pastures. Rivers already exist and dredging them would not use up more land.

The debate ended on a compromise: The Government will be given two more years to submit a definite bill on Inland Navigation and, more particularly, on the "Trans-Helvetian Canal", a century-old dream.

P.M.B.

SWISS EVENTS

The "Baslers" enjoy their Carnival

Every major Swiss city has its annual municipal celebrations. The most renowned of them all is the Basle Carnival — an event which many *Baslers* living overseas make a point of attending regularly. The Carnival is the highlight of the year for the city. It is launched on the Monday which comes after Shrove Tuesday. It thus began this year on 12th March. The Carnival gets moving before dawn — at 4 a.m. — this moment is called the *Morgestraich*. All at once, drum and fife bands are set in motion all over the town. Every street comes to life and the old alleys of the medieval centre of Basle are lit by torch-light processions. Literally tens of thousands of citizens with their children roam the streets and crowd in taverns (every one of them open) to enjoy thick meal soup and oignon cakes. They used to accompany this with hot chocolate, but now tend to prefer wine and beer. The cold prevailing in this early period of the year has not the slightest influence on tempering the enthusiasm and the merriment ruling over an event which is characteristic of a fun-loving population.

Appropriately so, Monday and the following Wednesday are official bank holidays entirely devoted to the Carnival. Basle forgets its conglomerates and factories during the three days from Monday to Wednesday. The Carnival takes precedence. The two main processions are held on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. Carriages often represent topical subjects close to the town. A flower-wagon carried the emblem "*Adieux richesse, bonjour tristesse*" — a reference to the departure from Basle — town of wealthy rate-payers. Another one celebrated the 450th Anniversary of the merger of the Comune of Riehen and Basle — an obvious reference to the fact that such a merger has not yet been achieved by the two half-cantons of Basle-Town and Basle-Land.

Between the two main processions, Baslers join in drum and fife-bands and walk along the cobbled streets of the old town, invading every tavern. Beer and wine flow freely and tills clang continuously to the joy of bar and restaurant-owners, who cash in more in those three days than they do in a month. Night clubs and dance halls are open all night. The whole place rings with Basler fun and Germanic gregariousness.

The Carnival is the first of any importance to be held in the year. It has been held the Monday after Shrove Tuesday ever since the Reformation, which seems to have broken the previous Catholic ruling preventing festivities after Shrove Tuesday. In the early days, Catholics used to assemble for Mass on

Morgestraich and the Protestants, roaming the streets in bands, used to beat their drums outside the Catholic churches to disrupt the services inside. These naughty traditions have given way to one of the most authentic manifestation of collective enjoyment in Europe.

The Carnaval is of course not an improvised affair but prepared months

in advance. A writer said that it was impossible for the outsider to understand the event by being present only for the first time. The Carnaval, he wrote, is above all an expression of the Basler sense of humour. But to understand this sense of humour and the particular flavour of the Baslers and their Carnaval songs, one should speak their dialect.

planned in their first year of operation. Beznau 1 and Muehleberg have been built with Swiss technology. The two mains sub-contractors were Brown-Bovery and Sulzer's who have thus gained the technological experience to compete abroad successfully in the field of nuclear energy.

The building of these power stations gave rise to a controversy over the necessary cooling of their installations by pumping water from the Aar. This raised the temperature of the river by one degree (or thereabouts). It was feared the river's ecology would be upset and as a result, the Federal Council decided to ban this cooling-method. The decision delayed the nuclear-energy programme of the electricity companies. The programme was further upset by strong opposition to the construction of a large air-cooled power-station at Kaiseraugst, near Basle. Conservationists claimed that the two 300 ft. high cooling-towers required would upset the areas weather. The Commune of Kaiseraugst refused to authorize the project. Building a nuclear power station in Switzerland requires a great many federal, cantonal and commune authorisations relating to the field of water protection, environment, energy and labour security. These obstacles have so far prevented a comprehensive programme from coming into operation.

The six Swiss regional electricity boards and the urban power companies of Zurich, Basle and Berne have warned in a recent report that unless work on a fourth nuclear power-station were started this

MORE NUCLEAR POWER-STATIONS?

Mr. Roger Bongin, Head of the Federal Department of Transport and Communications, recently called a Press Conference in Berne to tell the public that nuclear power stations were safe and that Switzerland should prepare to build them at a faster pace. Mr. Bonvin was surrounded by a team of federal experts, each of whom made an exposé tending to show that the dangers of nuclear power stations had been considerably exaggerated. Professor G. Wagner, Chairman of the federal commission on the protection of waterways from radiation, said that the present level of artificial radioactivity in Switzerland was less than 1/150th of natural radioactivity. Another specialist said that the dangers of nuclear radiation could be averted by adequate legislation. Such a legislation was already in force in Swiss nuclear power stations, he stressed.

Mr. Bonvin's conference was intended as a reassurance to those circles

violently opposed to the extension of Switzerland's nuclear power infrastructure. It was also meant to reassure the electricity industry, which has warned that the country would suffer from a severe power shortage within three years.

The question of nuclear-reactor safety still remains a scientific enigma opposing various schools of thought. First warnings have come from America, where several scientists point out that no serious studies have ever been made on assessing these dangers and securing against them. As a result, Swiss conservationists have campaigned against the erection of further nuclear power stations.

Switzerland has two of them at present: One at Muehleberg and another at Beznau. A third is in construction at Beznau. These power stations each generate a power of about 0.6 million kilowatts. They are believed to have suffered from teething troubles and produced considerably less energy than

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