

Comment : two foreigners for one soldier

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COMMENT —

TWO FOREIGNERS FOR ONE SOLDIER

At first sight, it might appear that Switzerland has her own Enoch Powell in the person of James Schwarzenbach, National Councillor for Zurich, whose name is associated with the "over-foreignisation" initiative on which the Swiss will have to decide next year. There are a few differences however. For one, James Schwarzenbach is not an outsider to his party, the Zurich Democratic Party, and does not ride alone as does the M.P. for Wolverhampton. The ideas for which he stands find a more temperate backing among Swiss opinion than the premonitions of Mr Powell among the working-classes of Great Britain. But the problem of immigration is quantitatively far more serious in Switzerland than it is in Britain. Mr Powell has been warning us that by the turn of the century 7% of Britain's population will be made up by immigrants, although this figure has been reduced to 4% by better authorities. He may be surprised to learn that 15.3% of Switzerland's population is foreign (admittedly not African or Asian) and that well over 20% of the work-force is imported.

The Schwarzenbach initiative aims at changing this picture. Ten per cent is fixed as the maximum percentage of non-Swiss inhabitants in any canton, a special allowance of 20% being granted to cosmopolitan Geneva. This means a reduction of over 40% in the present foreign population and would have dramatic effects on the economy.

That is why the Federal Council has strongly urged a rejection of the initiative. Not that it denies all good reasons for the apprehensions of Mr Schwarzenbach. Only the adoption of his initiative would backfire on Swiss economy in a disastrous way and defeat its own object. Tens of factories would have to reduce their activity because of shortage of labour. There would be no one to supervise the production-line, no one to operate the machines, no one to fire the foundries and the guests at Hotel Dolder will be told to polish their shoes themselves.

Economic expansion and stability of prices are intimately related to the availability of cheap labour. A shortage in supply of labour in an economy where there is strong demand will inevitably lead to a rise in the cost of labour and hence of prices. Full employment in the absence of an ample outside supply of labour is a near impossibility since it will lead to serious bottlenecks, lack of flexibility and increase in labour costs. I have read somewhere that the most stable proportion of unemployment in Great Britain lies between 1% and 2%. Should the percentage be smaller, then the home pool of manpower dries up and industry gets into difficulties. Switzerland circumvents these economic

realities by being in a commercial position to import massive numbers of foreign workers.

Since the beginning of the decade, the Government has sought to curb the influx of foreign workers by various decrees tending to fix a ceiling of the numbers which any firm was allowed to employ. These measures have invariably given rise to complaints among managers. Some said that this statutory shortage of labour was a handicap to their expansion schemes, many others protested against the injustice a common ceiling was bringing to industries more dependent on foreign man-power than others.

Expansion has depended on the importation of man-power and conversely, man-power has been imported as a consequence of this expansion. This is the economic background against which the Government's curbing measures have been applied. The effort has been rather like dabbing emollient on a purulent wound instead of injecting the patient with serum, with the result that there were 285,000 foreigners in Switzerland in 1950, 583,000 in 1960, 721,000 in 1964 and 930,000 today. Of the last figure, 280,000 only are residents. The rest are divided into seasonal workers, workers with a (renewable) 1 year-stay permit and borderers who go into Switzerland to work. The latter category are 63,000 in numbers.

Swiss economy has expanded so fast in recent years that it is not unfair to say that Switzerland is an "over-developed" country. A country that has so many factories that almost a quarter of its man-power has to be imported has really got an inflated economy. "Over-developed" but not "over-wealthy". There is still scope for Switzerland to get richer and she has yet some way to go to beat the U.S.A. But must this aspired prosperity be obtained at the cost of excessive industrialisation and forced importation of labour. Must the native population be swamped and the Swiss people disfigured? This is where the searching questions are to be asked. It is destructive to deprive industry of its indispensable foreign man-power, the wisest course being to steer it in a position where it will rely on it to a lesser extent. This means restructuring and replanning it. The Federal Council has recently declared that it will no longer be possible to artificially maintain a number of sectors whose production requires extensive man-power and who can survive only by hiring foreign workers continually. The time has come to concentrate on the sectors of industry requiring limited man-power, but the transformation must be accomplished gradually, if there is not to be economic confusion in the country.

The Swiss Government is then fully aware of the real problem, which cannot be solved by adopting the Schwarzenbach initiative. Nothing concrete has yet been proposed, but it seems highly probable that the general economic climate of the Western World, forcing every firm to rationalise and rely on machines, will urge factories to automate and do away with imported labour as efficiently as any Federal decree.

Apart from being an "easy way out" of the necessity of investing in modern and sophisticated equipment, the overabundance of man-power has some other economic disadvantages. It means a strong load on the balance of payments. Some fear that the traditional "Swiss quality" has suffered and will suffer even more in future. In the event of a war and a general repatriation, the country's economy would be paralysed.

But the problems which foreign workers bring with them are primarily social. One finds among the Swiss working-class the same kind of reactions against Italians as those one might hear in Shepherd's Bush against Jamaicans. "They breed like rabbits, they never wash, they are lazy, they are retarded, they have disgusting eating habits . . ." This fortunately indicates that what one calls "racism" in this country is not provoked by a difference in pigmentation but just by cultural and social variances.

It is inevitable that such numbers of foreign and unknown people, called "guest workers" in German-speaking Switzerland, should create some difficulties. It is a happy circumstance that this alien population is not exclusively Italian and that innumerable Spaniards, Jugoslavs and Turks have followed. Whatever anti-foreign resentment the Swiss might entertain, it can no longer be so sharply focused on Italians as it was a few years ago.

Entire communities have seen their population double and their members found themselves alien in their own parish in the space of a few years. What used to be quiet country Sunday mornings

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are disturbed by exuberant meridionals making noise on the village square. The local cinema performance is often troubled by unruly lobbies of Italians. Life has changed.

Immigrant children have meant a great strain on the schools. The welfare of the imported population has required an extra effort in the way of social help on the part of the authorities. Although foreign workers are rather poorly lodged, they often occupy cheap flats to the detriment of the Swiss, who find more difficulties in finding accommodation. The foreigner then tends to become the one "who drives the Swiss out of his patrimony" and transforms a quiet and clean Swiss village into something noisy and drab that comes from Sicily.

There is really nothing that can prevent a latent xenophobia from persisting, humans being what they are. The foreign workers who have not obtained a resident's permit are not allowed to bring their families with them. This is an understandable provision, because if every seasonal worker were allowed to bring his wife and his numerous offspring, there would be three or four million foreigners permanently in the country. Hundreds of thousands of men must come into Switzerland with their wives left at home and naturally lead frustrated lives conducive to a bad reputation among Swiss girls, and especially their parents — one more source of resentment against the "guest worker".

Few people oppose the Schwarzenbach initiative on humanitarian grounds. They oppose it only because it does not make sense economically. In England, Mr Enoch Powell finds a great deal of support or opposition purely based on emotional grounds. The problem of immigration is inevitably an emotional question to the people who have to live in close contact with the immigrants. In Switzerland, little emotional uproar has been caused by the initiative because it also meant massive "repatriation" of the "honest immigrants" and Mr Schwarzenbach has not been the target of any widespread vituperation. His moral reputation is relatively intact and he has not been accused of rousing the base feelings of the masses with the same intensity as has Mr Powell.

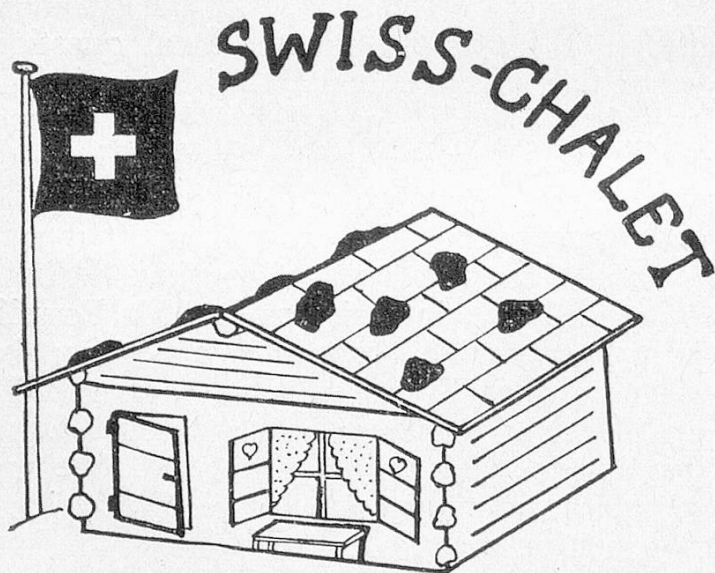
Idealistically, there is no insuperable obstacle in absorbing the odd 900 thousand foreigners civically as well as economically if they so wished. The children of workers from Anatolia, Calabria and Andalousia would do their military service, become officers in the army, eventually national councillors. Switzerland would become a fraternal melting-pot.

Unfortunately, Switzerland is not America. Poles, Germans and Irishmen came into the land of America, where nothing existed, and built the American civilisation. Today, these Poles are still Poles, these Germans still Germans and these Irish still Irish and at the same time they are American. The foreign workers do not come to make Switzerland — she has existed for centuries — they come to serve her for a fair remuneration. Whatever they can do, they cannot change a Swiss way of life

which is firmly established. In such great numbers, they will never really become part of Switzerland as it is now. The Swiss could never admit such a thing because they know that they could not stay one unified country while assimilating such vast numbers of foreigners; they would have to change themselves and redefine what is "Swiss".

One may even venture to say that it would be harder for Switzerland to absorb a sizeable outside population than for Great Britain, proportions being maintained. Becoming a Swiss is more difficult than becoming a Briton, it is not only administratively more tricky, but it involves so many more duties! The Swiss take nationality rather more seriously than the British and this aspect of their mentality is one more reason why Switzerland is humanly and psychologically not able to transform the alien thousands to whom she supplies daily bread and butter into full citizens. In these circumstances, the social climate brought about by immigration is bound to remain unhealthy and it is only wise that, in the long run, the number of aliens in Switzerland be reduced.

However desirable this may be, it must not be rushed. If the electorate had to decide on the Schwarzenbach initiative today, it is not impossible that, giving away to feelings, it would accept it. A further education of the public might be necessary for the initiative to be rejected outright when the Federal vote takes place next year so that the Government may be given more time to take the correct measures. (P.M.B.)



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