

The Government and Propaganda

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THE GOVERNMENT AND PROPAGANDA.

By PIERRE BÉGUIN.

Doubtless one of the characteristics of the regime we enjoy in Switzerland is that the government has no instrument of propaganda at its service. We have no Minister of Propaganda: we have, even, no government department whose job it is to influence public opinion. It is true that our Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which we call the Political Department, has a press section; but the task of this section is to make itself useful to Swiss and foreign journalists by supplying the information for which they ask, and also to keep the government informed of the opinions which are expressed in Swiss and foreign newspapers. It doubtless also happens that the Swiss travel associations invite prominent personalities from abroad, who wish to spend some time in Switzerland to study the country and its institutions, and do what they can to make their stay pleasant and instructive. But that is as far as we go.

Indeed, it can fairly be said that the Swiss Federal Government has been extremely scrupulous in this respect. In the old days, before any and every referendum took place the members of the Federal Government were very active in making speeches on the subject of the vote. But for the last twenty years or so this custom has fallen into disuse, and on most occasions when there has been a referendum our Federal Councillors have refrained from making public speeches or seeking to throw their authority into the balance. Our Civil Servants — even those of the highest rank — never enter into contact with the public, and it is understood once and for all that they are to act with the greatest discretion. All this shows the very general dislike throughout the whole of Switzerland for anything which has the least resemblance to government propaganda.

But it is possible that this rule, which is after all based only on custom and not on any legal provision, may not be observed in future. It is indeed understood that when the next referendum takes place the high authorities of the country will take part in the preliminary campaign and will try to convince the citizens that the Government point of view on this particular question is sound.

On December the third the people will be called upon to decide whether they wish to maintain the present system of taxation for another four years, or whether, on the contrary the Swiss Federal Government is to be deprived of a good half of its revenue until a definite and permanent draft text of what is to be the Federal financial and taxation system is drawn up and put before it. The referendum has become necessary because a draft text for the definite reform of the Federal financial system was voted down last June. Accordingly the only practical solution is to carry on with the present temporary system. That at least was the opinion of Parliament. It is not certain that people will share this opinion, especially because they will find it hard to forget the profound differences of opinion which were shown by the vote last June.

For the very reason that it is to be feared that, in the referendum which is about to take place, the public will decide against the government proposals; for the very reason that the government realises how difficult it is to get the sovereign people to resign itself

to the inevitable; the authorities are considering devoting considerable publicity to the matters at stake in order to convince the public of the gravity of the decision it is called upon to make. It is intended to send every citizen, not only the draft text of the financial law, as is always done on such occasions, but also an explanatory text which will attempt to persuade him to vote in favour of the draft. A central propaganda organisation is also envisaged — the task of enlightening public opinion is not to be left to a number of committees. And the Federal Council will direct these operations, enlist the necessary help and will act in such a way as to get the apparent agreement of the main political parties.

In those circumstances it is fair to say that the circumstances in which the referendum will take place at the beginning of December are completely new and original. This is an experiment. We shall see its results in a few weeks. Whatever they are, they cannot fail to be interesting.

SCHWEIZER PSALM.

(Translation)

When a wondrous day is born
We receive Thy golden dawn
We, Thy humble children give thanks to Thee
Alps and valleys fill with splendour
Shadows of the night surrender
In our prayers you restore
Peace among us evermore.

In the mountains' evening glow
We forget all pain and woe
Hear, Almighty Father, our praise to Thee.
Peaceful rest and joy unending
We to Thee our steps are wending
For Thy kindness doth restore
Peace among us evermore.

Wind and storm on lake and field
Heaven will protect and shield,
Darkness reveal a light from Thee
Once again the mountains yonder
Rise into a sky of wonder
And our joyous hearts adore
Thee among us evermore.

R.P.

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