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PROSPECTS OF A NEW REFERENDUM.

By PIERRE BEGUIN.

For the last four years or thereabouts Switzerland has been talking about tax reform, and everybody is tired of the subject. It is getting very hard to rouse the interest of the man in the street on this matter, but he will have to get used to the idea, for everything points to the likelihood that this question will continue to be in the forefront of public discussion for at least another four years and in all probability for much longer still.

We think we have good reasons for making such a prophesy. For one thing, the Federal Council has just asked Parliament to pass a draft law establishing a temporary system of taxation, and this will be put to the vote of a people's referendum towards the end of this year. This temporary system is to last for four years, which is the time the Government considers necessary to work out a permanent scheme of tax reform to take the place of the one which was rejected by the Swiss people in the referendum of 4th June last.

Nobody knows what shape this permanent reform will take and it is very hard to predict the probable direction which the work of the civil service, the government and the parliament will take. What we do know of is the temporary solution proposed by the Federal Council and which is to last for the next four years. The proposal is easy to define: what the Federal Council wants is to maintain the *status quo* but with a few small modifications of detail which are too unimportant to mention.

In other words the Swiss Government is taking no account of the public opinion of the last few years, and apparently does not attach much weight to the result of the vote of the fourth of June last. On the contrary, it asks everybody, all the political parties and all the economic organisations to bow their heads to the inevitable. To some extent it takes up this attitude: From the 1st of January, 1951, onwards we shall have to ensure that sufficient money enters the federal coffers so that we can meet the normal expenses of the federal government. We are up against a case of "force majeure." Don't let us waste too much time in talking, or in thinking about what we should like as an ideal solution, and let us agree to maintain what we already have. We are asking you this for the last time. In four years time the public will have the chance of approving a durable and permanent scheme of reform. Let us save up discussion until then, and let us recognise the necessity of keeping the Confederation solvent instead of driving it into bankruptcy.

It seems clear that Parliament will recognise the force of these arguments and will accept them with discipline but perhaps without enthusiasm. Moreover, the President of the Confederation has already taken precautions to ensure this by holding a meeting between the heads of the main political parties before the Government made a definite statement about what its proposals were going to be.

They gave their agreement in principle, which is valid up to the extent to which the president of a government can obtain a binding engagement from a militant politician. And so it seems that in September and October the two legislative councils will be resigned to accepting the proposals which will be put before them.

But it is not certain that the public will be so accommodating when the proposals are submitted to them. On the extreme left the retention of the turnover tax will be criticised. The Right will refuse to vote for the scheme which retains direct federal taxation, on the grounds that this is incompatible with the decentralised government of Switzerland. And then we must also take into account the big floating vote among the public, regarding whom we can only be sure of one thing, that the public is tired of paying heavy taxes, seeing that there is no reduction in the number of civil servants and no economies in public administration. Probably much of his floating vote will in this case be against the government's proposals, and for this reason alone the result of the referendum is very doubtful.

But there is still one argument which will certainly be used, and which will have a strong influence on the result of the referendum. It will be said that the Federal Government must not be exposed to a financial adventure and that the Swiss, who are realists, will recognise the truth of this. It will also be said that the international situation makes it necessary to avoid internal quarrels and to realise national union, even on the basis of a compromise about which nobody is enthusiastic. In similar circumstances in 1938 these arguments were enough to secure the adoption of a proposal which in normal times would have met with opposition. We shall see whether the same thing happens this time.



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