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“SPOTLIGHT.”

PIERRE BÉGUIN. (26.3.1952)

Some twenty years ago, the Swiss Socialists were violently anti-militarist. In their criticisms, they did not only attack certain methods which prevailed in the Army, but they also denied the very principle of national defence. They were of the opinion that Switzerland, like Denmark, should give an example of absolute pacificism and disarmament. Every year, their parliamentary representatives rejected the military budget.

This attitude, however, did not last. Under the influence of events, more particularly as a result of the seizure of power in Germany by the Hitlerites, the Socialists have now rallied to the principle of national defence. This they have done ever since 1936, that is to say, soon enough for our country to be able to face the period of the Second World War in an atmosphere of national unity and the firm determination to defend itself. It should be said, however, that there was one man who had greatly contributed towards provoking this change of front within our big opposition Party. This was Mr. Minger, Federal Councillor and head of the Military Department, in other words our Minister for War. Breaking with all tradition he himself went to the Socialist meetings, in order to be the bearer of contradictory ideas. He addressed his opponents directly. He went, so to speak, right down into the arena. He was listened to and he convinced more than one hesitating listener.

This example has remained memorable. It is true that our Federal Councillors speak at public assemblies which are organized by neutral associations. And, if it should happen that they have to make a speech at a Party meeting, it is always the Party to which they belong, the Party in which they began their political career. It hardly ever happens that they go to a meeting in which they are certain to be practically the only ones to uphold their opinion. But, a change has occurred in this direction.

This is what has happened. A short time ago, some deputies from the wine-growing regions declared in Parliament that the imposition of a tax on all beverages, including Swiss wines, would provoke an indescribable indignation in these wine-growing districts and that they, for their part, would not take it upon themselves to defend, before the people of the country, a financial project comprising such taxation. The new Socialist Federal Councillor, who is also the Head of the Department of Finance, replied that for his part, he did not suffer from such timidity and that he would willingly undertake to speak before the wine-growers in the French-speaking regions, in order to defend his project for the taxation of beverages.

Mr. Max Weber was taken at his word. Last Sunday, he spoke in Lausanne before a large assembly, the majority of which was composed of wine-growers. He made no attempt, to spare them. Very simply and frankly he exposed his point of view. He defended his project. He did this in an objective manner, without allowing himself to be swayed by his feelings, as a good Cabinet Minister rising above all personal interests, and placing himself at the point of view of the general interest.

As one had expected this meeting took place in an atmosphere of perfect calm. The discussion which ensued was extremely courteous. The Federal Coun-

cillor, who was practically alone in his opinion was warmly applauded. His success was, for the least, equal to that of his opponent who presented and defended the thesis of the wine-growers with considerable ardour.

It would perhaps be somewhat bold to assume that he convinced his audience. But, at any rate, he proved the fact that a discussion is always possible between good citizens. Objectivity has not lost all its rights. One must, of course, take into account the mentality of the Vaudois who are fond of saying: “Our Government authorities — one criticises them, it’s true, but one really likes them. And, anyway, one respects them.” In our part of the world, plenty of deference is shown to a statesman, to a member of the Government, whereas a member of parliament does not enjoy the same respect.

And, anyway, there is this to be said that by taking the initiative of going in order to support an unpopular cause in a hostile meeting, which was refractory to any attempts at conversion, Mr. Weber has rendered an important service of a general order. After all, direct democracy such as is practiced here, is based entirely on respect for another’s opinion and on free discussion. Our régime will only remain alive and fruitful in the measure to which these principles are not violated, where it will be possible for everyone to express their conviction clearly and definitely. A good lesson has been given to the political parties and the big economic associations which, only too often, adopt an uncompromising and even intolerant attitude. If the example shown by a Federal Councillor were to be followed, we should only be the better for it.

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