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HOME AFFAIRS.

PIERRE BÉGUIN.

"Difficulties in getting information in Switzerland."

For a long time past, already, complaints have been going on in Switzerland, in a general fashion, and in the most divers circles regarding the lack of official information given out by our authorities. The journalists who are directly interested in this matter, and more especially the correspondents of the Swiss newspapers who are accredited to the Federal Palace, are ceaselessly putting forward demands in this respect. But, not only they, but also the public in general, the man in the street, are in agreement with these criticisms. It cannot be denied that there exists a certain malaise.

This situation has arisen out of several causes. For instance, it is quite certain that the circumstances of the last war have exercised a deplorable influence in this particular domain. At that time, secrecy was often justifiable. But this developed into a habit and what should have remained an exception during a limited period has now become a general rule. On the other hand, it is undeniable that our administration is very hierarchical, and that custom obliges Government officials, even those of superior rank, to maintain the strictest discretion, so that it is practically only the members of the Government who possess the right to make any communications to the Press and to public opinion; these statesmen, however, are so over-burdened with work that it is impossible for them to find the necessary time to occupy themselves with such information activities. Finally, it must be said that this situation would appear to us to be all the less justifiable, as, in other democratic countries, very broad views are taken in regard to the release of information. Such is the case, for example, in the United States of America and it often happens — far too often — that we learn of events or of decisions concerning our own country, as for instance regarding our commercial policy, not directly from Berne, but through the intermediary of foreign agencies.

This situation which, if not really serious, is unsatisfactory, deserves to retain our attention. The whole of our régime is based on free discussion and

on the permanent control of public opinion. Finally, no decision can be imposed and agreed to unless the public, the citizens as a whole, have had sufficient time to assimilate it, to understand the reasons for it, and thus be able to follow all the different phases of its elaboration. Logically, information should be more highly developed in a régime of direct democracy than in other régimes which are not so broadly democratic, as for instance in a representative democracy. But, curiously enough, and even paradoxically, the contrary would appear to be the case.

The New Helvetic Society must therefore be congratulated upon having taken the initiative for the organisation of a big debate on this problem. This Society, which has already rendered such valuable service in establishing highly useful contacts among people belonging to divers circles of activities, as well as between the authorities and the citizens, has once more justified its existence and its utility to the nation.

Thus, recently, in Berne, there took place a very comprehensive and serious exchange of views between politicians, journalists, ordinary citizens and one Federal Councillor. Mr. Feldmann, Head of the Department of Justice and of Police, who, himself, used formerly to be a journalist.

What lesson is to be learnt from this discussion? As a matter of fact, it is not necessary for any — or practically any — technical measures to be taken. In the domain of information, everything depends on a state of mind, on a mentality. What is needed is that the members of our highest authority should realize to a greater extent the advantage that there would be for the whole of the country if they were to throw open more widely the doors to complete information, only that which is secret remaining the exception. And this new state of mind, once it has been introduced at the head of the hierarchal ladder, should then spread towards the bottom, so that certain of the senior ranking Government officials may, in their turn, be allowed to take the responsibility for making some communications to the Press.

In all probability, this will be accomplished for Mr. Feldmann is full of good will and the determination to succeed. Good luck to him in his endeavours!

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