

Landsgemeinden 1963 : Switzerland's Open Parliament

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LANDSGEMEINDEN 1963

Switzerland's Open Parliament

OF THE twenty-two Cantons in Switzerland three are divided into "Half-Cantons," Basle into Baselstadt and Baselland, Unterwalden into Obwalden and Nidwalden, and Appenzell into the Protestant Ausserrhoden and the Roman Catholic Innerrhoden. Four of these "Half-Cantons" and the Canton of Glarus have retained the system of the "Landsgemeinde," the purest form of direct democracy. This People's Parliament which looks back on a history of more than five centuries demands the presence of all voters in order to discuss affairs of state and elect the government.

On the last Sunday in April the "Landsgemeinde" of Obwalden met at Sarnen, that of Nidwalden at Stans. The two parts of Appenzell met at Hundwil (Ausserrhoden) and Appenzell (Innerrhoden). On 5th May the "Landsgemeinde" of Glarus met in the Cantonal capital of the same name.

At Sarnen, nearly 1000 electors took part, among them Federal Councillors Tschudi and von Moos, the latter himself as citizen of Obwalden. The Government of the Canton of Solothurn were official guests. For three hours the electors did their duty in voting for their government, accepting various credit demands and listening to heads of departments who gave information regarding the proposed constitutional amendments and bills which would be voted on by ballot on 12th May.

At Stans the government of Baselstadt were official guests, and Federal Councillor Wahlen and President of the National Council Guinaud were present with their wives. A picturesque procession walked through Stans to Wil, where Landammann Dr. Graeni opened the Parliament in beautiful spring weather. Two thousand citizens took part. The twelve motions put before the electorate were all accepted, ten of them without any discussion. The motions covered tax rates, proposals affecting Cantonal finances, revision of the educational statute, credits for roads and a new station at Stans and the Canton's contribution towards the National Exhibition. A counting of votes had to be taken after the showing of hands for and against was questionable. An Italian had made an application to accede to the "Landrecht." The final count showed that 619 voted against and 344 for his application for civic rights. A short divine service of thanksgiving followed the assembly at the Pfarrkirche at Stans.

The electors of Appenzell Innerrhoden, again in beautiful sunshine, met in the capital at lunch time. A procession of official guests, military and political personages, among them the government of the Canton of Schwyz, wended its way from the town hall

to the Landsgemeindeplatz. The whole route was gaily decorated with flags and lined by dense crowds.

In his official welcome Landammann Dr. Broger talked about the history of Appenzell and its entering the Confederation 450 years ago and finally he surveyed world politics.

The business dealt with by the citizens in the "Ring" resulted in some surprises as the present Landammann's successor was not the candidate everybody expected to be elected, but a well-known local baker who was nominated from the "Ring" and then voted for by the majority. And there was a second surprise when the said baker and newly chosen Landammann was elected as Councillor of States to represent the "Half-Canton" of Innerrhoden on the Council of States in Berne.

At the "Landsgemeinde" of Appenzell Ausserrhoden which took place at Hundwil some 8000 citizens assembled, each of them carrying a sword, sabre or bayonet as insignia of citizenship and manhood. Several thousand spectators had come on the beautiful spring Sunday to watch the impressive ceremony which was opened by the singing of the hymn "Alles Leben stromt aus Dir" ("Lord, all life streams forth from Thee"). Landammann Kuendig welcomed the official guests, the youngest in office of the Swiss Federal Councillors, Bundesrat Bonvin, the municipal government of St. Gall and high officers of the Swiss Army.

Amongst the business items to be dealt with were the accounts for 1962 which the assembly accepted. The elections of government officials and judges went smoothly and the discussion of various insurance proposals caused no great upheaval. Of interest may be the decision to start a fund in preparation of the jubilee in autumn of Appenzell's joining the Confederation in 1513. The handsome amount of half a million Swiss francs (well over £40,000) was voted for.

The "Landsgemeinde" ended on the serious note of taking the oath. A week later the last of the open-air parliaments, that of Glarus, took place at the Canton's capital of the same name. Six thousand electors assembled in the "Ring." Amongst the guests of honour were the government of Appenzell Innerrhoden, and the Ambassadors of Canada, the U.S.A. and South Africa, as well as military and Federal officials.

Landammann Feusi conducted the meeting, which lasted 3½ hours. A number of motions were accepted, sometimes after very lively arguments. These were particularly spirited when the revision of the hunting bill was up for discussion. Large sums were voted for the Cantonal hospital and the sanatorium of Braunwald. Finally, against the proposal submitted by the government, the "Landsgemeinde" decided not to keep shops open any more on the Sunday preceding Christmas.

[A.T.S.]