

How Switzerland is governed

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HOW SWITZERLAND IS GOVERNED.

The Swiss National Tourist Office has published recently an account of "The Political Institutions of Switzerland" written by George Sauser-Hall, Professor of Law in the Universities of Geneva and Neuchâtel. The book explains how democracy works in Switzerland, and should appeal to our younger generation in the Colony, for their benefit we give the following extracts:—

"The Swiss system appears complicated for a country which is about twice the size of Wales and contains roughly twice as many people, or half the population of Greater London. The justification of the existing arrangements is that they have seen Switzerland safely through two world wars and have established a state of perpetual and absolute neutrality for its territory. Largely for that reason Geneva was chosen as the seat of the League of Nations after the first world war and continues to be the scene of deliberations of world-wide import after the second conflict. In the same way, Lucerne, undamaged by the ravages of the last war, seemed the natural centre for the International Railway Congress this year.

The Swiss Confederation is a republic consisting of 22 cantons which are real states, exercising sovereignty side by side with the central government. The Confederation is supreme in diplomacy, military affairs, public works, education and law, but the cantons can legislate for all matters which the constitution does not expressly exclude from their authority. The Confederation alone has the right to grant concessions for railways, and reserves to itself monopolies such as customs, post office communications, coinage,



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and the issue of bank-notes. The cantons on the other hand, administer the laws enacted by the Confederation, supervise many social services, and develop industry and agriculture by means of subsidies. The cantons are bound to help each other in matters of civil and criminal justice.

Nowhere do the Swiss rely on the British type of representative democracy. The people elect a parliament, but also have the power to propose, adopt, and reject laws. In some cantons the people actually meet in popular assemblies to discuss public questions, much as the ancient Greeks used to do. Every male citizen over 20 years of age has the right to express his opinion on matters of policy; oddly enough, women have no political rights. The referendum is used extensively in deciding whether a law shall be enacted or rejected.

The constitution guarantees to all Swiss citizens equality before the law. Freedom of conscience likewise is declared inviolable and freedom of the Press is unrestricted in normal times. Every citizen has the right to devote himself to the profession or trade which he prefers. It is illegal to limit the number of workers in a trade and to prevent newcomers from exercising their profession. The right to strike is allowed to ordinary workers, but is withheld from State employees. There is a movement on foot to solve labour difficulties by forming corporations of employers and workers to safeguard the status of different trade groups. Collective labour agreements, providing for the arbitration of disputes by neutral tribunals, are compulsory once they have been accepted by the majority of the employers and workers concerned.

The Swiss parliament bears the name of Federal Assembly. It is composed of the National Council, representing the people, and the Council of States, representing the cantons. These councils have equal rights and powers. Each of them chooses from among its members a President, who directs its proceedings for one year. Agreement between the two houses is indispensable for the framing of statutes and decrees. The executive authority of the Swiss Confederation is vested in the Federal Council, composed of seven members elected by the Federal Assembly for a term of four years. The President of the Council, however, is elected for one year only. Commonly called President of the Confederation, he represents his country at home and abroad, but does not possess the right of veto.

Until the first world war the Swiss Confederation was in a sound financial state, balancing its budget largely with the revenue from customs. Since 1914 solvency has given place to a long series of deficits. Consolidated debts have increased from 1,641 million francs to 7,128 million in 1942. These debts impose on each inhabitant a charge of 1,670 francs, of which 697 francs represents the debt of the Federal Railways. From 1931 onwards, the cantons also have borrowed money extensively, and the communes within the cantons, which correspond broadly to our urban and rural district councils, have spent more than their taxes produced. The total debts, accumulated by the Confederation, the cantons, and the communes, exceed 10,000 million francs. We do not gather from Professor Sauser-Hall's pages that the burden of public debt weighs heavily on the Swiss people. Their outlook may be restricted, but they are convinced that democracy is the form of government which best assures individual freedom, the rights of minorities, justice, and social progress."