

Disciplined democracy

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DISCIPLINED DEMOCRACY.

(The following article is reprinted from the February issue of "Irish Independent Dublin" by courtesy of the Editor.)

I have never been able to understand the notion that a nation without its own language is only half a nation. One could not seriously suggest that Belgium or Switzerland are not nations, model nations at that. Outside Europe this exaggeration sounds even more impossible, since, for instance, no single State on the American continent could thus qualify, yet who could deny the proud nationhood of French and English speaking Canada; of the United States, of Portuguese-tongued Brazil, Spanish-speaking Mexico, Argentine or Chile.

No country pricks this argument (and the proud case of Gaelic can well do without it) more resoundingly than little Switzerland.

Of every 100 Swiss, 72 speak German — as strong a local dialect as Yorkshire or Cork is in English and with much more regional differences, but the one and the same written language as Reich German all the same — 20 speak French, six Italian, and two that very little heard of tongue, Romansch.

As you travel from Geneva to Berne, somewhere round Fribourg (seat of a famous Catholic University), which is equally Freiburg, the traveller becomes aware of crossing the linguistic frontier inside Switzerland, for *Tous les billets, s'il vous plait*, becomes from there on *Alle Billette gefaelligst* in the mouth of the same train conductor. Every Swiss worth his broth knows two of his country's languages — and certainly every official and civil servant.

How is it that three great languages and two great religions (41 per cent. Catholic and 58 Protestant) live so amicably side by side, burghers of one State? Democracy has here stood the test because its roots are deep, its growth natural, its development sound; it has

grown from parishes into towns, from towns into cantons, from cantons into a Confederation.

There are 22 cantons, but three of them have been divided, for reasons of language or religion, and thus Switzerland is really 25 sovereign states, each with its own budget, its own home-grown organisations, each a self-government in which everybody shares — built on the home rule of 3,000 communes.

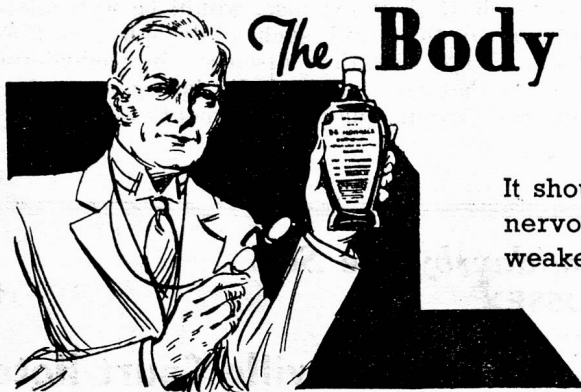
In many cantons survives the oldest form of democracy, the *Landesgemeinde*, a parliament in the open air which debates and votes in the town square. I attended one some years before the war. The cantonal government sat on a platform in the centre of the square, the burghers lined the quadrangle ten deep, the boys watched the proceedings from the trees — their first lesson in practical democracy. It was a Catholic district, so their annual Parliament began with a *Veni Creator*, which resounded mightily against the sky-high, eternally snow-topped mountains all around, holding this community as if in God's own mighty hand.

Centuries of such disciplined democracy have indelibly marked the Swiss character. He is free to criticise, and a people's referendum gives him the last say in any law of importance.

In the Great Council of another canton I watched the provincial legislators at work, most of them farmers with weather-beaten faces and strong fists, a fair sprinkling of beards — and beards are beards here. Most of these men had milked their cows that very morning or been behind the plough.

What struck me was their exemplary parliamentary training; they listened to each others views, they did not talk past each other — as is the habit of most parliaments. It is their way to talk it out, vote, and then adjourn amicably to the local inn, where the hefty stone tankards of beer taste good in the low-ceilinged, heavy-beamed cafe room, which is but a much larger edition of their homely *Stube* on the farm.

How disciplined Swiss democracy is, proves the



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fact that every conscript at the end of his military service takes his rifle home with him, complete with ammunition, it hangs in a place of honour in his living room. The State entrusts him with it, because it is sure that he will not use it against public authority since he, the citizen, is himself part and parcel of that Authority.

The Swiss keep a weather eye on all developments and go slow in centralising more power. During a war they appoint a General-C.-in-C. Guisan's sympathetic countenance can be seen hanging in the place of honour in every inn, in many shops — but he reverts to Colonel once the emergency is over. The peace-time army has no General.

The five dioceses have no Primate, nor even an Archbishop. Each of the five Bishops communicate directly with the Holy See. During the war the Swiss accepted a Press Censorship much stricter than in Ireland, so that no hot-head could endanger national security or relations with powerful neighbours. Lifted only last year at the same time as freedom of speech and assembly was restored, the administration of such wartime measures has since been fully reported to Parliament for discussion.

The Federal Parliament only legislates in matters affecting the entire State — such as war, peace and treaties, defence, currency, post, common law, epidemics, and other matters of all-over national concern. When, some months ago, an attempt was made to write unification of transport into the Constitution — a law accepted by the two Chambers of Parliament — the people, feeling strongly that no further powers should be centralised, turned it down in the subsequent Referendum, in which they themselves have the final yea or nay, by a 2 to 1 majority.

Having studied the people of Switzerland in their institutions, let us watch them at play.

In every Swiss city the Kursaal is the centre of social activities. It accommodates about a thousand people, who sit at small family tables in a huge hall in which the orchestra plays from the stage — a homely affair, and especially at the inevitable Sunday afternoon concert an ideal vantage point for the spectating journalist from abroad.

I found it curious to observe that the average Swiss man cuts a much more handsome figure than his womenfolk. The Swiss woman is a typical Hausfrau, pleasant, but on the plain side. I saw few pretty girls, and real beauties but seldom. What they wear, however, is, on the whole, of much better quality and style than what is worn by our much prettier Irish girls and women, but somehow their Swiss sisters wear it without any nonsense about it.

The men, however, are worth observing. Faces like those on old Roman coins abound, the younger generation especially is tanned from sun and snow. They dress well, albeit without a trace of the dandy. They are quietly ceremonious Herr Professor — smoking his inevitable square cigar — takes it out of his mouth whilst doffing his hat, returning the salute of a door-keeper. They are friendly, but in a solid rather than spontaneous way; slow as their soft cadenced speech. They don't effuse or fuss over you. You feel instinctively that their word is as good as their bond, which make the atmosphere of Switzerland one of sincerity and reliability.

GRAND PRIX SUISSE DES AUTOMOBILES GRAND PRIX D'EUROPE DES MOTOR- CYCLETTES ET SIDECARS.

Un riche programme en perspective.

Le public suisse a appris avec enthousiasme que le Grand Prix suisse des automobiles et le Grand Prix d'Europe des motocyclettes et sidecars se dérouleront ensemble, les 7 et 8 juin, sur le splendide circuit de la Forêt de Bremgarten, près de Berne. Aussi l'intérêt que soulèvent ces deux grandes manifestations de sport mécanique va-t-il croissant, et l'on peut prévoir que ce weekend sportif sera le "clou" de la saison 1947.

Le programme de ces deux grandes journées des 7 et 8 juin sera particulièrement riche. Le samedi après-midi 7 juin, les feux seront ouverts par les motocyclettes de la classe 250 cc.; suivra le Grand Prix de Bremgarten des automobiles, course nationale en circuit pour voitures de sport et de course; et l'après-midi se terminera par la bataille des motocyclettes de 350 cc., dont la vitesse n'est plus guère inférieure à celle des machines de 500 cc.

La journée du dimanche 8 juin s'ouvrira de grand matin déjà par la première éliminatoire du Grand Prix de Suisse des automobiles, qui sera suivie elle-même de la course des acrobates des sidecars. Puis se disputera la 2ème éliminatoire du Grand Prix de Suisse des automobiles, à laquelle succédera la passionnante épreuve des motocyclettes de 500 cc., qui se livreront une lutte gigantesque pour le Grand Prix d'Europe de la F.I.C.M. Enfin, la finale du Grand Prix de Suisse des automobiles, épreuve internationale, viendra parfaire le succès de cette deuxième journée en déchaînant l'enthousiasme des milliers de spectateurs accourus.

Le règlement de la course des automobiles et celui de l'épreuve des motos sont actuellement en cours de révision et sortiront prochainement de presse. Les intéressés peuvent d'ores et déjà en passer commande au Secrétariat de la course, Theodor Kochergasse 4, à Berne.

SP.

ALBERT FERBER (SWISS)



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