

# How the Swiss are governed

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# HOW THE SWISS ARE GOVERNED

## The story of a Nation founded on a political ideal

As our January "Special Issue" has produced an encouraging number of new subscriptions, it is more than likely that many of our readers are not conversant with the seemingly arcane world of Swiss politics. Recording the main Swiss events, we are often brought to refer to such entities as the "Federal Council" and the "National Council" and other similar Swiss institutions which some Anglo-Swiss readers could certainly be forgiven for ignoring. We thus undertake to briefly describe the main features of the Swiss political framework.

Switzerland is politically organised according to the precepts of the 1874 Constitution, which is itself a modification of the 1848 Federal Constitution. The latter gave the first solid framework to the Confederation and its enforcement marked the birth of modern Switzerland.

### The Constitution: institutional backbone of the nation

The Constitution is a most important and elaborate document. It is perhaps not as "sacred" as the Americans' Constitution and its "Founding Fathers" remain generally unknown, yet it plays a central role in the political life of the country. This is due to several reasons which would require considerable space to analyse, but the most important seems to be that it maintains, by the *Referendum*, a constant and close link between the people and their elected representatives. Direct democracy is mainly exercised through direct popular action on the Constitution. A Referendum is a national vote accepting or rejecting a proposed amendment to the Constitution. The amendment can be put forward by the people themselves – if they can obtain the backing of 50,000 signatures. Although there is another kind of Federal Referendum known as the "optional referendum", the Constitutional Referendum has played a much greater role in shaping Switzerland's history and institutions.

This is why the Constitution is a practical and ever-present reality of Swiss politics and is at the origin of at least two referenda every year. The last such referendum took place of 4th March.

The Constitution guarantees the federal structure of the Swiss state and preserves a fair degree of autonomy to individual cantons. There are 22 of these (or, more precisely, 19 cantons and six half-cantons) each endowed with their own constitution conforming to the Federal Constitution. Cantons also have their own government and parliament. A handful of them have a really popular parliament known as a *Landsgemeinde* in which the citizens are personally present, on the appointed day, on the

central square of the cantonal capital. This is perhaps the most complete embodiment of democracy today. The smallest political division is the *Commune*. It too, enjoys a considerable degree of independence and is protected from cantonal and federal interference in several fields of activity. It enjoys more political economic autonomy than a British rural district. A commune means more to a Swiss mind: one is in fact a citizen of one's commune before belonging to a canton or to the Confederation.

### The problem of absentees

Because the people have a chance of making decisions by-passing, as it were, their elected representatives, the Swiss system is referred to as "direct democracy". This direct democracy is also exercised at three levels: Federal, cantonal and communal. Voting on a federal issue will usually be timed with polling on local matters. Swiss citizens are called on the polls on average four or five times a year. Voting takes place on weekends and voting slips are mailed to individual electors who will usually have to express their position on several issues as they go to vote in their ward or district.

The Constitution regards voting as the duty of each citizen, but one notes a growing tendency to absenteeism. The ideals of democracy are not always alive among those who enjoy its benefits. For some local issues raising little or no interest, attendance at the polls can be as small as 12 per cent. For a few "hot" issues, up to 80–90 per cent of the registered electorate may turn up. A fine of one franc is inflicted on citizens who fail to vote and bring back their voting envelopes to the Town Hall.

### Woman in Parliament

Nearly two years ago, Swiss women were given the right to vote in federal matters. It was their men who gave them this right in a referendum. The gradual progress of women's political right in Switzerland is a long story strewn with set-backs and sudden spurts. The first (French-speaking) cantons gave their women the right to vote in cantonal issues in the late fifties. The example caught on very slowly, and women were still being refused permission to vote at cantonal and communal level in several parts of the country after they had won the right to vote on federal matters (i.e. legislative elections and referenda) in the summer of 1971. However, the situation has evolved quickly since then. The count changes nearly every week, but, at the present time, there should be very few cantons or communes indeed where women are

not granted equal rights to men. What is more, women were for the first time elected to Parliament in October, 1971, when ten of them took their seats under the dome of the Federal Palace, and last year, a *Landsgemeinde* saw the presence of women – something which its conservative participants would never have dreamt of a few years ago.

The absence of voting rights for women, which has hurt Switzerland's reputation in many quarters and prevented its signing of the Human Rights Convention, was linked to the fact that only men able to bear arms were entitled to vote. Partaking in defense and decision-making were two indissoluble responsibilities of the citizen as created by the original Confederation. Thousands of women take an active interest in political life but, by and large, their new-won rights have not led to a significant fall in absenteeism.

Another means of direct action on the federal government is the recourse to an optional referendum which must be backed by 30,000 signatures following an "initiative". Citizens can thereby ratify international treaties or turn down non-constitutional legislation. This instrument is in much greater use at cantonal level. The decision to close bars at midnight in Zurich, for example, was taken as the result of an optional referendum. There are moreover compulsory cantonal referenda calling for the popular verdict on all decisions involving expenditure surpassing a given amount.

### The bicameral system

The Confederation is run on a bicameral system. The National Council (lower house) has 200 members elected by proportional representation. As each canton forms a constituency, the larger ones are more abundantly represented in the House. To restore the balance and give the small cantons a say, the Council of States (upper house) assembles 44 representatives from the 22 cantons. The National Council is elected by the people every four years; whereas delegates to the Council of States are elected by the people or Cantonal parliaments following procedures which vary from canton to canton. Both chambers have the same powers and must agree on every new bill. If new legislation is not accepted in both houses, a joint arbitration committee is set up and an agreement is thrashed out. The Council of States is generally more conservative than the National Council and this has a slight influence on their decisions. At the last legislative elections, no less than ten parties won seats at the National Council. They were the Radical Democrats (49 seats), the Socialists (46), the Conservatives (44), the Agrarians (now

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called the Centre-Democrats, 23 seats), the Independants (13), the Republicans (11), the Liberal Democrats (6), the Labour Party (5) and the Evangelical Democrats (3). This is far away from the two-party system and, in practise, from party politics. Several parties have regional grounding. The Conservatives, for example, are prominent in the small cantons of central Switzerland whereas the Socialists are firmly established in Geneva and Vaud. Owing to this vast deployment of parties and an established tradition of decency, debates are held in a dignified and dispassionate atmosphere. No hustling and no abuse (Mr. Cyril Smith could make no complaint) ever perturb the thoroughly unexciting atmosphere prevailing in the Federal Palace. Both houses hold four sessions a year totalling about three months. They sit together for certain business, in particular for the election of federal executives.

### An Over-burdened Cabinet

The *Federal Council* is the Government and is elected by Parliament. It is traditionally re-elected at the beginning of every new legislature and is renewed through voluntary retirement. It is a collegiate body consisting of only seven members responsible for seven "Departments", or ministries.

Members of the present government are Mr. Roger Bonvin (President of the Confederation for 1973 and Head of the Department of Transport and Communications), Mr. Nello Celio (Finance), Mr. Ernst Brugger (Economy), Mr. Rudolf Gnaegi (Defense), Mr. Kurt Furgler (Justice and Police), Mr. Hans Peter Tschudy (Home Affairs) and Mr. Pierre Graber (Foreign Affairs). They take it in turns to become Swiss President. Last year, that prerogative befell on Mr. Celio,

the year before, on Mr. Tschudy. The title is a purely formal one and does not entail extra powers.

A moot point is to reduce the burden of these "ministers" by increasing the number of departments. This is periodically suggested, but the most recent proposals put forward were apparently turned down by the Federal Council. The seven members of this coalition government are traditionally elected from the three most important parties and the Independants, and from the three most populated cantons (Zurich, Bern and Vaud) and Italian-speaking Ticino. Thus the selection of a new federal councillor always involves subtle political and geographical considerations.

### Parliamentary procedure

The Government enjoys considerable power in enforcing decrees relating to the details of the execution of laws voted by Parliament. In fact twice as many decrees (*arrêtés*) are issued by the Executive as laws and decrees promulgated by Parliament. These decrees are enforced for a limited period of time during which they are not subject to the legislative (optional) referendum. New bills are introduced by the Government. There is no means by which Swiss citizens can introduce new legislation directly: they can only turn down bills that have already been passed by resorting to the optional referendum. Parliament can spur the Government into action by tabling a *motion* calling on the Executive to introduce a bill in accordance with its instructions. It can also address a non-binding *Postulate* asking the Government to examine a particular question, and an *Interpellation* asking for explanations and voicing criticism. Motions, Postulates and Interpellations must be sponsored by a given number of members. The censure motion or vote of confidence does not exist, and, reciprocally, the Government can't dissolve Parliament. These provisions help to ensure lasting stability. Contrarily to what is happening in several other countries, elections to the lower house take place at regular intervals.

A glance at the political composition of the two Houses will show that they are dominated by conservative and liberal tendencies. Some groups, such as the Independants have particular concern (in this case – the interests of the consumer) but they are all aligned with the present Swiss order of things. The only exception is the tiny Labour Party, which has replaced the former (and banned) Swiss Communist Party. The Republican Group, which includes the anti-foreign Action Party, stand out against some of the social implications of Switzerland's booming economy.

### Basic political consensus.

The Socialists are no more left-wing than the British Labour Party. They have no intention of turning Switzerland into a socialist state but aim at bringing the benefits of prosperity to the working

classes. Arguments in Parliament are usually conducted according to one's personal philosophy and not following party guidelines. This precludes lobbies and inter-party friction – which at the same time makes the work of the political correspondant rather uninspiring.

A principle which is not questioned by any party, including left-wing groups, is that of Neutrality. This has been the mainstay of Switzerland's foreign policy throughout history. It was only once briefly jeopardised by Switzerland's membership to the League of Nations, which entailed joining in sanctions against particular states. This, incidentally, is the reason why the Swiss are still not members of the UN, despite growing pressures at home. Neutrality strictly precludes any political involvement which could be interpreted as "taking sides" with any party in a real or potential conflict. As a result, Switzerland has not joined any defense and even monetary alliance, and has not, until the beginning of the present Helsinki talks, taken part in any international conference that was not of a strictly technical or institutional nature. By that token, it was not possible to join the Common Market, but it was no departure from neutrality to join the European Council and take part in the non-political activities of the UN.

### Still formally neutral

Despite much talk on "possibly" joining the World Body "when the time is ripe" and of asking the people beforehand, all the recent declarations of Swiss leaders show that the official attitude to neutrality has not changed since the war-time days of General Guisan. A point of no small importance is that Switzerland's credibility as a strictly neutral nation is a valuable instrument of world peace. Present efforts are aimed at an opening towards the world from the firm vantage-point of ideological non-involvement. As a recent development, Switzerland has established formal links with East Germany and North Vietnam. Problems of development are attracting more interest every year and Switzerland has a modest but efficient annual foreign aid budget of about 90 million francs.

Swiss neutrality is defended by a militia army into which every able man must serve. Recruits accomplish an obligatory training period of four months after which they must practise their military skills for yearly "repetition courses" which are spaced out at longer intervals after ten years. Swiss men remain in contact with their units until they are about fifty. Officers are selected among volunteers having proved certain standards of ability and education. As repetition courses take place all the year round, the tourist will find a startling presence of troupes in country villages and railway stations. Seeing concrete fortifications at every mountain pass, he will be inclined to believe that the Swiss live under an army-backed regime. However, Switzerland's defense budget is one of the lowest of the modern world and accounts

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for hardly more than 2.5 per cent of the gross national product.

### Federalism, and ideal scarred by time

A final reference should be made to federalism. Federalism, neutrality and direct democracy not only make up the foundations of Switzerland as a State, but also as a people. The fact that, apparently against all logic, a French-speaking Swiss probably feels closer to a German-speaking compatriot than to a Frenchman is the unique consequence of the community of political beliefs and ideals shared over the centuries by two people of different language, culture, and temperament.

Although federalism would seem to be a dissociating factor, it has in fact helped to strengthen the institutional cohesion of the Swiss by preserving the individual identity of each canton, and hence their mutual respect. The ideal is still very much alive today among the grass roots, but the extension of urban living and increasing financial dependence on the Central State have nibbled at its vitality. The facts of modern life have inevitably led to a growing control of the provinces by Berne at the expense of regional governments. But Switzerland is fighting to keep its federal structure (which is reflected in every aspect of cultural life) failing which she would find herself losing her historical personality. This, of course, is probably inevitable. But the Government and the Swiss establishment intend to fight a vigorous rearguard action and defend federalism by

carefully not overstepping federal prerogatives, by giving cantons a chance to settle their differences by intercantonal agreement and by consulting them on every new important item of legislation.

Federalism, neutrality and direct democracy are political options which have been enhanced into the values without which the Swiss as a nation would begin to question their identity.

# Swiss Abbeys

## A WALK TO THE MADONA DEL SASSO

If you take the road leaving off to the left from opposite the central post office of Lacarno, you will soon reach the cantonal main road. To the left of it you will find the ancient Capucine Convent. It was founded in 1602, but serves today as an institution for deaf and dumb patients and as a boarding school for weak children. To the right, you will see the high wall of the enclosure of the Sainte Catherine Monastery, founded in 1616 with an Augustine Abbess. The building was completely destroyed by fire in the 16th Century.

Above this monastery, which is in at the heart of picturesque surroundings, towers a secondary school for girls built in 1894 with its beautiful garden and superb exotic plants. Starting from the main road to the left of this establishment, a path leads up the hill to the celebrated monastery of the *Madonna del Sasso*. The ever-changing scenery and the splendid view, which is a delight to the

eye of the stroller, makes the charm of this beautiful region.

In 25 to 30 minutes, one arrives to the church. It is built 355 metres high on a rock between two wild ravines. The edifice is surrounded by an imposing colonnade. The interior is heavily decorated with ornaments and gilt objects.

Inside the chapel and to the right can be admired Bramantino's "Flight into Egypt". In the other chapel on the left the visitor is profoundly moved by the "Burial of Jesus", a masterpiece by the painter Antonio Ciseri (1821-1891) of Ronco (near Ascona), and one-time professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence.

Thousands of pilgrims, Italians mostly, come every year to kneel in front of the Madonna. Capucine Fathers officiate at the pilgrimage.

The Monastery can also be reached by the Locarno-Madonna del Sasso funicular railway.

*Pierre Savoie*

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