

Farewell to our ambassador

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Farewell to our Ambassador



THE Anglo-Swiss Society held its annual general meeting at the Savoy Hotel in London on June 7. The business part over, members and guests gathered for a reception which in turn was followed by a dinner attended by many distinguished personalities, among them Mr C.S.R. Giffard, Deputy Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Her Majesty's Ambassador in Berne, 1980-82.

It was a splendid occasion, though a sad one, too, for it was to say farewell to the Swiss Ambassador and Madame Caillat who are retiring to Switzerland.

The dinner over, the Rev the Lord Sandford, DSC, who was accompanied by Lady Sandford, addressed the gathering in his capacity as president of the Anglo-Swiss Society.

On behalf of the society and its friends, he expressed regret at the impending departure. He thanked Monsieur and Madame Caillat for all the active interest taken in the Anglo-Swiss Society, and wished them a happy retirement.

The ambassador thanked the president for the sentiments expressed and began his reminiscences by recalling his first tour of duty in Britain in the mid-'40s. It took him 33 years before

achieving his ambition to be posted to London again. Monsieur Caillat went on:

“I was a witness of very remarkable events during my first stay in London, and I had some memorable experiences.

After two years in Nazi Germany during the war, where we had a very difficult task protecting the nationals of allied countries, I was expelled because I foiled a Gestapo plan to abduct an American diplomat from whom the Gestapo wanted to extract valuable information.

Since I only followed my line of duty and acted within my rights as a diplomatic representative of a US national, my attitude could not be criticised and the reason given for my expulsion was just fabricated. My ambassador in Berlin was informed that I had to leave the country immediately because I was a US spy.

That incident had a very fortunate consequence for me: I was sent to London.

London was a scene very different from Berlin under the Nazis. Whereas the Nazi regime was corrupt and inefficient, I found in this country a remarkable dedication to the common cause.

The free world was saved by the British, who at the time of

greatest danger were fighting alone with a courage and a determination we shall never forget.

I remember the night of May 8, when Londoners celebrated the victory in Europe. Churchill appeared on the balcony of the Ministry of Health in Whitehall. He said: “Good old London, with indomitable spirit, determined never to surrender!” And he sang with the crowd “Land of Hope and Glory”.

Well, it is still good old London which my wife and I will be very sorry to leave.

During the war years I became a member of the Reform Club. Brendan Bracken, who was Minister of Information, left Downing Street one evening saying that he was going to have dinner at the Conservative Club. Later in the evening news came to Downing Street that the Conservative Club had been bombed.

Winston Churchill had enquiries made as to the whereabouts of Brendan Bracken. Secretaries telephoned the police and hospitals, but no one had seen him. Eventually a secretary telephoned the Reform Club, which is next door to the Conservative Club. The doorman who answered the call said:

“Yes, Mr Brendan Bracken had dinner at the club and is on

his way back to Downing Street”.

“The Prime Minister will be very relieved”, said the secretary, and he added: “I am glad that nothing happened to the Reform Club”.

“As a matter of fact, sir”, replied the doorman, “the club has been on fire for the last two hours”.

The war years and the years after the war was the time of the giants. It was Churchill's time, but it was also the time of a remarkable statesman, Ernest Bevin, who became Foreign Secretary when Labour won the election in 1945.

My ambassador at the time, Paul Ruegger, who is certainly the most remarkable diplomat Switzerland has ever had, became a very close friend of Ernest Bevin and they used to meet often.

Once I was invited to lunch by Paul Ruegger. Bevin was the guest of honour. I made a great effort to conquer my shyness and asked Bevin what was the British policy towards Germany.

“Young man,” replied Bevin, “there is no British policy towards Germany because I haven't had time to devise one”.

Shortly afterwards Bevin started an uphill fight to persuade his colleagues in government and public opinion that the

time for extracting reparations from Germany was over and that it was imperative to reconstruct Germany.

The idea did not catch on immediately. There was some very understandable resistance also in the United States, where the so-called Morgenthau Plan, whose main purpose was to deprive Germany of industrial power, had many adherents.

Some time later – it was in '47 – I was a guest at a luncheon party given by the Foreign Press Association. It was during this luncheon party that Ernest Bevin made his famous speech accepting and explaining the Marshall Plan.

My second tour of duty, which started at the beginning of 1980, has been an experience no less interesting and rewarding.

Some people say that things have changed very much in this country. It is certainly true in some instances: there is no smog any more and the scars of the war have disappeared. But traditional British institutions are still with us.

The pre-eminence and the skill of the City are acknowledged everywhere. Scientific and technological achievements are in abundance and the way to economic progress can be clearly

seen. Cultural activities prove that the new generation is as talented and enterprising as the older ones. Glynedebourne is exactly what it used to be 30 years ago.

Nothing has changed and the quality of the performances is higher than ever. I would say the same about Covent Garden, the Coliseum and everything that makes London the most important centre for the arts in Europe.

But I should like to point out particularly that the manners of the people over here have not changed. People are polite and considerate, and London is, I think, the most civilised city in the western world.

Many prominent people continue the great British tradition of giving their time and effort for the promotion of institutions or causes in the interests of the public, be it the National Trust or whatever. When I go to Whitehall I get the same friendly welcome and intelligent reaction which I remembered from 30 years ago.

There have always been very close ties between this country and Switzerland. The Swiss have the highest regard for, and confidence in, the democratic traditions of the British. For many Swiss the Common Market became more re-assuring from

the time Britain joined it.

Traditionally, Britain has always defended the rights of small European countries, and Switzerland has been no exception in this context.

Swiss neutrality is well understood and generally accepted in this country. Nobody is seriously urging us to join NATO. People familiar with European affairs take the view that the strength of the West, and indeed of Western Europe, stems in part from its diversity. To stamp out that diversity would lead to giving up the strength derived from tradition.

It is sometimes pointed out that Switzerland spends a larger proportion of its national income on defence than some West European countries. Spending on defence is widely accepted in Switzerland because the Swiss know that they have to rely on themselves if they are to remain independent.

Some time ago I was asked to take part in a BBC programme answering questions about Switzerland put by listeners. Quite a few of the questions boiled down to this: "How did a small country like Switzerland manage to remain independent although surrounded by big powers?" There are many reasons for that.

One of them is our national defence.

I don't think that Swiss political experience can be considered as a useful reference in this country, mainly because Switzerland is very small and Britain is a large country which has civilised a great part of the world. But there are similarities.

For instance, the Swiss approach is chiefly pragmatic. The same is true in this country, where problems are dealt with when they arise and there is a noticeable distrust of grand designs.

Some of my British friends say that the British never set out to conquer an empire – they more or less stumbled into it. One thing led to another. There has always been in this country a certain lack of enthusiasm for the very idea of empire. I am sure that many of you have seen the cartoons which were published at the time when, at the prompting of Disraeli, Queen Victoria became Empress of India.

Swiss political institutions have the same inspiration as British political institutions. One of their main aims is to protect individual liberties.

We have always considered in

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Switzerland that our political institutions are not for export, especially not to a country like the UK, which is so much larger. Furthermore, basic political institutions, constitutional laws, as we say in Switzerland, are like shoes: the more you wear them the more comfortable they are, but it doesn't mean that they would necessarily fit somebody else.

Nevertheless, there has always been an interest in this country in Swiss political institutions. For instance, I am often asked for information about what, in Britain, is called local government, and what can be loosely described in Switzerland as federalism.

Leading figures in this country, including, as a matter of fact, Mrs Thatcher herself, have taken an interest in the working of referendums in Switzerland.

There is also an interest here in our militia system, on which our armed forces are based.

Some of our policies, particularly in the monetary field, are watched closely over here, especially our efforts to keep the Swiss franc on a steady course.

The election campaign in this country has features which are reminiscent of what happens in other Western democracies, including Switzerland. In Switzerland tradition is very powerful and, as a result, many people vote for a party whoever the candidate is. The same can be said of this country.

TV has changed electioneering very much. I remember from my days in France a French cabinet minister complaining to General de Gaulle that political rallies did not attract as much interest as they used to. General de Gaulle's answer was very typical. He said: "Why should the voters want to see you



One of the most memorable occasions during M. Caillat's period as Swiss Ambassador to Britain was when he accompanied the Queen on the royal tour of Switzerland. He is seen on the extreme right of this picture, when the Queen paid her historic visit to the Rütli. On the left, describing the birthplace of the Swiss Confederation, is the then President of Switzerland, Mr Georges-André Chevallaz.

when they can see me on TV?"

There is no doubt that in this country TV tends to focus attention on the leaders of the political parties.

The election campaign is a proof, if ever one was needed, that one of the oldest democracies of this world is working and still going strong. We are grateful to the British for maintaining this tradition and for remaining an example for the world to follow.

The ambassador concluded by stating that London was the most sought-after assignment in the Swiss diplomatic service and that he and his wife had been very fortunate to spend the last few years here. They felt very close to Britain, to its traditions and to its mission in the world.

"I should like to thank you, on behalf of both of us, for everything you have done for us".

Prolonged applause testified to the audience's appreciation, and a memorable evening came to a close.

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