

Willi Ritschard, man of the people

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1983)**

Heft 1808

PDF erstellt am: **15.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690390>

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Willi Ritschard, man of the people

THIS year's elections were overshadowed by the death of probably Switzerland's most popular politician, Finance Minister Willi Ritschard (reported briefly in last month's *Swiss Observer*).

"Our Willi", as he was affectionately known, was 65. He died of a heart attack only one week before the elections – and two weeks after announcing that he planned to retire at the end of this year.

The minister was on a Sunday stroll with his wife and friends in the hills near his native Solothurn when he collapsed.

On-the-spot attempts to revive him failed, and he was flown by helicopter to hospital, where he was pronounced dead. He had suffered an earlier heart attack last year.

The son of a shoemaker, Willi Ritschard was himself a manual worker before entering politics as a member of the Social Democratic Party. He became a trade union secretary at the age of 25, and held political posts at municipal, cantonal and national level before winning election to Switzerland's seven-man coalition cabinet in 1973 as Minister of Transport and Energy.

He was President of Switzerland five years later, and since 1978 had been Finance

Minister in a country that has emerged from the worldwide recession with a current unemployment rate of only 0.8 per cent and an annual inflation rate of 1.4 per cent.

Willi Ritschard and Defence Minister Georges-André Chevallaz (Radical) – both were elected to the cabinet on the same day 10 years ago this month – announced in October their intention to retire at the end of this year. Their successors will be named this month.

When Swiss radio and television broke into regular Sunday programmes to announce Willi Ritschard's death it was to a stunned nation. The country went into mourning and flags were flown at half-mast. Many Swiss wept openly.

Thousands of people, from the jeans generation to senior citizens, queued at the Houses of Parliament in Berne to sign the condolence book. A delegation from the Soviet embassy took its turn. Messages of sympathy were received from western governments, including Britain.

The funeral service at Solothurn Cathedral was relayed by loudspeaker to thousands waiting in the streets – some of them foreign workers here, understanding little or no



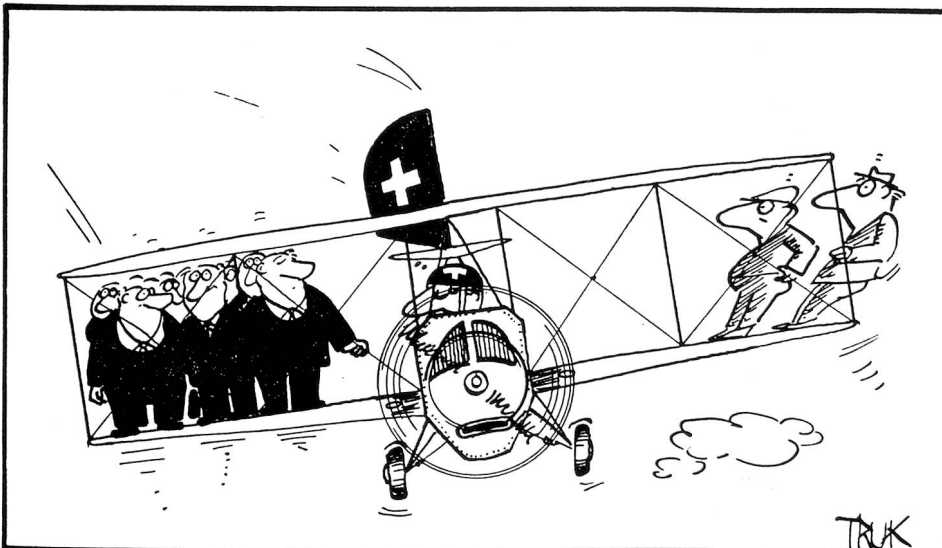
German. Swiss President Pierre Aubert described Willi Ritschard's death as the loss of a friend for everyone – "even those who had never met him".

And newspapers of every political persuasion published pages of praise, some

Turn to Page 6

The words of Willi

"The Swiss get up early, but wake up late".
"Those who say we must tighten our belts are people who usually wear braces".
"People who seek the truth are not dangerous – only those who claim to have found it".
"Having a head on one's shoulders is, in itself, not enough. Even a cabbage has a head".
"We Swiss are no longer a country of cowherds and farmers. And the image of the Swiss is no longer of a fellow whose hands are stuck in his pockets – this would be impossible anyway with the tight blue jeans so many people wear today".
"Peace is not simply a matter of putting one's army rifle away into a cupboard. Peace is a permanent human mission".
"Tolerance is a suspicion that others are right".
"What we Swiss people need is international open-mindedness".



A shift to the right in Swiss general elections

(Co-op Zeitung)

The day Willi offended protocol



The late Willi Ritschard

From Page 5

simply headlined "Goodbye Willi", for the man who – in the words of the *Berner Zeitung* – became a legend in his lifetime.

Willi Ritschard's enormous popularity stemmed from his working-class background – he was the only member of the 1983 cabinet and one of the few ministers in Swiss political history not to have had a university education. He also succeeded in cutting through the pomp of politics and in explaining the increasingly complex affairs of state to the man-in-the-street in simple, straightforward style.

Willi Ritschard also won popular renown for his satirical humour – rare among Swiss politicians – and his ironic speeches and sayings. The most memorable of these have been compiled in a best-selling book and

some are published on the previous page.

But some circles of staid Swiss society felt that his frank and forthright words sometimes went too far – as in 1980 during Queen Elizabeth's visit to Switzerland.

Public interest was at fever pitch (it was the first ever official visit to Switzerland by a reigning British monarch) and the Swiss press had been particularly lavish in its comments about the Queen's wardrobe.

Willi Ritschard – apparently piqued when his May Day speech in a Bernese village had to be re-scheduled so that he could attend a royal banquet – prepared to let off steam.

"Of course, we are all called upon to bow and scrape. But usually in front of employers. Me, I never bow and scrape. I'm amazed that so many Swiss buy newspaper rags which describe all the clothes worn by the Queen, from outer garments down to her underwear.

"We Swiss are republican. I really cannot understand how we get so much pleasure from looking at the Queen".

In the event, Mr Ritschard apparently decided that this was rather strong stuff, and changed his speech. But the original text had been distributed in advance to Swiss newspapers. And some went ahead and published the references to Royalty.

Following the death of Willi Ritschard, the British Secretary of State Sir Geoffrey Howe sent the following message to Swiss President Pierre Aubert:

"I was extremely sorry to hear of the death of Federal Councillor Willi Ritschard and send you, the people of Switzerland, and Mr Ritschard's family my deepest sympathy".

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