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Swiss Experience With Decentralized Government

by

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SWISS EXPERIENCE WITH DECENTRALIZED GOVERNMENT

BY VICE-CHANCELLOR DR. HANNA MURALT-MUELLER

We Swiss men and women like to identify ourselves with the main characteristics of our government structure: Federalism and direct democracy.

The Swiss perceive the essence of their nation in different ways. There is one part of the population that idolizes traditional value, and all that which has worked well for them in the past.

The other - equally extremist part - is made up of those, whose negativity and self-criticism is excessive to the point of annihilation.

However, the vast majority is formed of citizens, who are aware of the considerable advantages our society and government structure provides. They know that constant improvement is necessary to keep up with the rest of the world, therefore are accepting the challenge to adapt to today's fast-changing conditions.

Key-words: Switzerland as a small state within a European Union which is in the process of organizing itself as such.

Switzerland within a world-wide globalization process.

Switzerland which has to constantly define anew its political position, struggling to establish an identity - domestically as well as internationally.

A VIEW FROM THE INSIDE AND THE OUTSIDE

As I go on, I'll deliberately insert visual insights of an outsider (projection). These are humorous and satirical comments made by an Englishman, Paul Bilton, the author is married to a Swiss woman and lives in Switzerland.

Let me warn you: his comments should not be taken too seriously, but he's right on for the most part!

SWISS FEDERALISM - A SUCCESS STORY?

Four languages, four cultures - German, French, Italian and Romansch in all nation made up by 26 states (the Swiss call those "cantons") and over 3000 townships and communities. All of them of variable size and affluence.

The largest city, Zurich, has more civil servants on its payroll than a small half-canton's population entitled to vote. Yet, it is represented on equal terms in the second chamber of the parliament, whereas the city of Zurich - although an economically powerful metropolis is just another community within the canton of Zurich itself.

There are many more, equally significant dividing lines within the system - such as the separation of two Christian denominations, a multitude of political parties, everyone determined to bring its own regional-linguistic or even cantonal coloration into the Swiss motherparty.

These dividing lines run through the country in a cobweb-like fashion. This is reason enough, why Switzerland became THE paradigmatic case of political integration (Deutsch, 1976).

The small state of Switzerland distinguishes itself by economic wealth as well as orderly and stable political conditions. Generally speaking, Switzerland is very well capable of joining the ranks with other economically powerful nations, first and foremost through its sophisticated banking system. It is highly competitive with a considerable innovational potential.

HOW CAN THIS TYPE OF FEDERAL STRUCTURE BE INTERPRETED ?

Switzerland is - due to its evolution - a somewhat "unusual" case. Grown historically over centuries within its own federal structures, it was proclaimed a state in the 19th century. A nation consisting of four different cultures and 4 different languages. At a time when other European nations were in the process of forming their own independent state - one language - one state - , Switzerland emerged as the "antithesis".

Economy and society - like anywhere else - have grown and developed around the larger urban agglomerations, however, it is this incongruity between the present federal structure based on historical-traditional values and economic - political leadership which causes tension. Nevertheless, it seems to be almost impossible to bring the current federal structure into line with new socio-economic realities.

It is true that efforts are being made to modernize the old local administrative structures, to annul the formation of half-cantons - there are even plans about re-organizing the whole of Switzerland into bigger cantons in order to create better opportunities in the socio-economic field.

But historical, cultural components are of tremendous importance and not easy to change. So, existing local-regional structures have to be analyzed and serve as the base on which to build on.

The big challenge today is not a question of changing domestic concepts, but of finding a new position for Switzerland within a rapidly growing, increasingly organized European Union. Consequently, a new place needs to be found within an international structure. This seems to be difficult for the "Alpine Republic...."Switzerland didn't welcome the European Union in the same manner as other states did - it was spared of both World wars, thus did not consider the EU to be the peace producing tool against raging nationalism.

Although, Switzerland - in order to serve its own interests - does take the European law into consideration when passing new laws. And, bilateral contracts with the European Union have been established by the Swiss Parliament, but the negotiations within Switzerland are still going on.

Switzerland, like many other nations, is facing the challenge of cooperating and participating in international endeavours as well as in supra-international organisations like the United Nations, influencing developments which reach out much farther than the existing state-borders. For example, the issue of migration, transportation and ecological policies, security policies, just to name a few.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Federalistic structures are based on the idea to prevent concentration of power in one place hence, a form of decentralization. Swiss direct democracy is the sharing of power in regard to political institutions. The direct public rights consist of:

- the right to take initiative which entitles every citizen with the right to vote**
- to demand a plebiscite in order to change a constitutional law or amendment.**
- the obligatory referendum, which is necessary to change constitutional amendments.**
- the optional referendum, which allows citizens to call for an additional plebiscite, after parliament has passed a resolution.**

As a rule there are four federal, cantonal and communal elections per year and it is the power of the referendum which forces the government and the parliament alike to present bills which are likely to be accepted by the majority of the citizens.

Precautionary measures are taken to prevent the major, most powerful political parties from paralyzing the government machinery by tying them into the government structure.

Up to this day, Switzerland doesn't have a government opposition-system like other European countries. It's government is based on mutual concordance. The political

negotiation process takes place within the government system. However, the most recent elections show a tendency towards a break with the traditional, typically Swiss art of differentiation within the multipolar system, moving in the direction of a bipolar, left- and right wing pattern, which seems to be generated and boosted by mediagenic slogans.

Rumor has it, that Switzerland is made up primarily by minorities and that minority protection is so fierce, that everyone wants to be part of one. If that is so, it holds only true for Swiss men and women. It is not the case for not-integrated minorities, such as foreigners living in Switzerland, et alone refugees and asylum seekers.

Logically, this type of decision making process is slow, even arduous at times, but the result leads to high stability - or sometimes gridlock. Once those decisions are made however, they are usually well accepted by the public and put into action. Direct democracy flourishes on every level.

This is also valid for innovations and impulses in terms of future developments.

WHAT IS THERE TO BE DERIVED FROM A DIRECT DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM?

The question on which level democracy has the best chance to grow and develop, be it regional or local, within the state as a whole or in supra - national structures, cannot be asked in this manner or at least cannot be answered in a general a fashion. The question about the existing political culture, especially the mutual interaction among minorities should be considered THE central issue of importance. Switzerland too, is dealing with problems in connection to public acceptance of certain minority groups, in fact on all levels of federalism.

For example, there is a Swiss community which calls its inhabitants to the ballot-box in order to decide whether a request for naturalization of an alien resident

should be granted. Of course, this request is bound to be rejected in no uncertain terms. The Swiss press reacted to this with extremely sharp criticism.

Or there is the other case of a Swiss half-canton, slightly infamous for still relying on markedly direct-democratic decision-making procedures: they only allowed women to vote after severe pressure had been put on them and intervention from the Swiss Federal Supreme court forced them into compliance.....that too, with considerable delay!

Democracy and human rights are not optimally protected or furthered on a designated government level. Mutual control of every institution within the federal structure is of utmost importance in order to prevent any violation of democratic rules, as well as the media which helps to detect potential abuse, thus creating the necessary political pressure.

Today however, considerable control comes from the surveillance and sanctioning measures applied by international publicity. First and foremost, the development of international laws with emphasis on the reinforcement of institutions in charge of human rights should be the center of attention. The international court of justice, the international war-criminal tribunals which, at present, have been established for Jugoslavia and Ruanda should become as effective and influential as to create a discouraging and preventive effect.

„Switzerland is a federation of twenty-six cantons, including three half cantons.

These cantons are like miniature countries: self-financing, raising their own taxes and spending them as they want ...

Historically some were once sovereign states and many still believe they are.“

Paul Bilton, Xenophobe's guide to the Swiss, Ravette books, 1995

„Land-locked, a home market smaller than London, speaking four different languages, no natural resources

no secured markets for its products through either colonies or being part of a trading block, Switzerland should have come to earth with a bump long a ago.

Instead... Switzerland has the highest per capita income in the world. But take consolation, they don't enjoy it one bit.“

Paul Bilton, Xenophobe's guide to

the Swiss, Ravette
books, 1995

„The cantons comprise over 3000 totally independent communities, each making its own decisions about such things as their welfare systems, gas, electricity, water, local roads and even public holidays. Who controls this recipe for disaster? ...“

Paul Bilton,
Xenophobe's guide to
the Swiss, Ravette
books, 1995

„Who controls this recipe for disaster? On the one side the federal government, and on the other the Swiss public with their unique and powerful direct-voting system. By being balloted on every conceivable issue every three months, the Swiss dog actually appears to wag its own tail.“

Paul Bilton, Xenophobe's guide to the Swiss, Ravette books, 1995

„The Swiss federal system is like democracy gone mad. If citizens can scrape together enough signatures, they can have any issue put to the vote. Only Swiss good sense has so far prevented irresponsible proposals like ‘free beer for all’“.

Paul Bilton,
Xenophobe’s guide to
the Swiss, Ravette
books, 1995

„The whole system seems a guaranteed formula for deadlock and gridlock. But with votes of „no-confidence“ an impeachment forbidden, Switzerland has one of the most stable governments in the world.

The result is that the stock market, Swiss business and commerce are free to invest and plan without keeping a weather eye on a changing political climate.“

Paul Bilton, Xenophobe's guide to the Swiss, Ravette books, 1995
