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Missing from the Federal Council since 1919

Geneva: still Swiss?

«We declare that we desire to regain all our liberties and win our independence in renouncing the alliance which has bound us, the Republic of Geneva, to the Helvetic Confederation since 1814. We, the Republic of Geneva, being encompassed by artificial frontiers which confine us unto strangulation, declare our desire to recreate the «Pays de Genève» with our neighbours of the Pays de Gex and of Haute-Savoie.»

This clap of thunder burst like a veritable bombshell out of the clear blue sky of the confederal calm on 9th December last. Switzerland had then just followed, often live in front of the box, the re-election of the Federal Council. The Neuchâtel Social Democrat René Felber and the Berne SVP candidate from the Oberland, Adolf Ogi, were already installed in the seats left vacant by Pierre Aubert and Leon Schlumpf. Geneva itself had once again been pushed out of the Federal power game. Rejected, as he had been by his own parliamentary faction, Geneva Social Democrat Grobet had in fact known for more than two weeks that he would not become the next Federal Councillor.

What place?

Yet at every election to the Federal Council the question arises as to the place and the role of Geneva within the Confederation. Come to that, not without reason, for Geneva has not been represented in the central government since 1919, the year of the departure of the Liberal, Gustav Ador. And since then by no one; but not for want of trying: the Radical Democrat Henri Schmitt in 1973, the Christian-Democrat Guy Fontanet in 1982, the Radical-Democrat Robert Ducret in 1983 and, last, the Social Democrat Grobet in 1987.

No one, in these circumstances, can be really astonished that the question of Geneva's belonging to the Confederation should

periodically resurface. But the creation, very officially announced on 17th February 1988, of the «Genève Libre» movement, whose declaration is quoted at the beginning of this article, undeniably marks a new stage that cannot be fully explained by the mere vicissitudes of Federal politics. Incidentally, journalist Michel Baettig put it perfectly in a book whose title «Geneva: Should it Remain Swiss?» seems both a joke and a provocation.

The poor relation

It is quite obviously the economic gap between the «golden triangle» (Zurich-Basle-Olten) and the «triangle d'azur» (Geneva-Yverdon-Lausanne) which is of primary importance in this argumentation, not to mention the setting up, in the azure triangle, of only the subsidiaries of most of the large German-Swiss companies. It is worth remembering that each triangle is of the size of about ten per cent of Swiss territory, but that the golden triangle represents 35% of the population and 40% of the national revenue whereas the *triangle d'azur* has to be content with 16% and 17% respectively. Apart from this widely-known economic aspect, it is also the feeling the Genevise have of being the poor relations of the Confederation which it is fitting to emphasise. Poor relation in the matter of industrial endowment, Zurich Airport, for example, having been much more generously subsidised than Geneva-Cointrin. Poor relation in the matter of transport, Geneva having still to wait for its motorway bypass and a rail link to the southern shore of Lake Geneva. Poor relation in the fiscal field, Geneva doing more than its duty towards the financial redistribution, or paying 200-300 millions of francs more to the Swiss old-age and dependents scheme than the scheme itself pays in pensions in the canton at the end of the lake.

So perhaps, above all, Michel Baettig's book will have brought it home to the Genevise that their canton – separated from the Confederation in much the same way as Liechtenstein – would be capable of survival, for Geneva is rich enough to embark upon such a venture, away from the bosom of the Confederation. For example, it would at last be able to treat itself to a real casino. And, no longer having to submit to Federal diktats, it could bring in all the foreign workers it needs. Lastly, even the militia questions are not relevant: in strengthening its international status, the city of Calvin should hardly have any difficulties in keeping out of conflicts.



Two water jets on the Geneva roadstead. A bold project to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the Confederation. (Photomontage: Lunic SA, Geneva)



World outlook

It is an open secret that Geneva is the least Swiss of all the cantons. Historically, most of the great personages of the Republic and Canton of Geneva have achieved an international dimension: General Dufour, victor and peacemaker of the Sonderbund War; Pictet de Richemond, Swiss negotiator at the Treaty of Vienna; Henri Dunant, founder of the Red Cross. Still today, perhaps more than ever, Geneva is first of all an international capital, housing, as it does, the European HQ of the UNO.

Furthermore, even the political geography of the canton tempts the Genevese to look out on to the world: four-and-a-half kilometres of border with Switzerland against more than a hundred kilometres of frontier with France, the real Geneva hinterland. And it must be said that the upswing of the economy of the city of Calvin has enhanced this aspect, especially because of the increasing presence of a very important workforce of both Swiss and foreign labour which can but have been prejudicial to the cohesiveness of the Genevan social fabric and the identity of the Genevese.

Present-day relations between Geneva and the rest of Switzerland inevitably remind one of the old couples who finally settle down to live together, first in silence, then with indifference and at last even with downright hostility. If we have not yet reached this last phase, it is none the less high time that we lend force to our dialogue and give strength to our links. Indeed, the State of Geneva is already getting busy on this, having commissioned a study on the perception of Geneva in Switzerland and having nominated an official in charge of information, whose special brief is public relations beyond the Sarine. *Marc Savary*

Telegrams

■ Over the next two years the Swedish-Swiss electrical engineering concern, *Asea-BBC*, newly formed at the beginning of this year, will cut some 2,500 jobs out of a present total workforce of 18,000 in Switzerland.

■ Large *PTT* project: since February, the most modern advances in the field of telecommunications in everyday life have been put to the test in extensive trials in twelve model communes.

■ In 1986 the private economic sector in Switzerland spent almost five billion Swiss francs on *research and development*, solely at home.

■ The *population* of Switzerland increased in 1987 by 43,400 persons, and at the beginning of 1988 had reached a total of 6,566,900 inhabitants. This is the highest yearly rate of growth since 1972.

Entrepreneuse 1987

A young woman, Fides Baldesberger, has been chosen as Swiss Entrepreneur of the Year, for 1987. The owner and head of the firm of Outils Rubis SA in Stabio, Ms Baldesberger is the second winner of this prize which is awarded by the Champagne house of Veuve Cliquot in memory of its own enterprising founder. Fides Baldesberger became the proprietor of Outils Rubis on the death of her father. The firm employs 35 people and has been making precision tools for the watchmaking and electronics industries for 50 years. Despite her initial total lack of experience of advanced technical and commercial affairs, she has managed to loosen the dangerous dependence of her firm on one market – Silicon Valley in the USA – and, particularly, to increase exports to the Far East. More than this, she has developed new products which sell to further market sectors such as telecommunications, medicine and cosmetics.

New banknotes?

The Swiss National Bank is considering the introduction of a new series of notes which would replace the existing series in the 1990s. The talk is of withdrawing the 500-franc note from circulation and introducing a 200-franc note. There is a run on the Swiss hundred-franc note, and the idea is that a two-hundred-franc banknote would greatly ease the load on it.

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