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CONTENTS

Forum	
Switzerland and its cantons	4-7
Official News	9/10
SRI News	11
Portrait	
President of the Confederation Jean-Pascal Delamuraz	12
Culture	
Contemporary furniture design in Switzerland	13
Votes	
Federal referendums of March 10, 1996	14/15
Mosaic	16/17
Ping-Pong	18
SSA News	19

Cover:

The 26 Swiss cantons use their coats of arms to foster their history and culture and express their autonomy. They also contribute to cultivating the identity of Switzerland as a whole.
(Cartoon: Heinz 'Pfuschi' Pfister)

I M P R E S S U M

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When we were children we had great fun spotting the various cantonal flags on the garlands fluttering from balconies . . . The red and blue of Ticino (a deliberate reference to the colours of Paris) next to the ibex of Grisons, the bull of Uri, the stylised bear of Berne and the eagle of Geneva.

Later at school we learned all that lay behind these flags, each so different from the others yet all united by the common denominator of the white cross on the red background. As we reached adulthood, the territorial and human realities represented by the flags became part of our lives: so many little states (cantons and half cantons), each with its own mentality and therefore its own institutions and rituals – and not only at the political level.

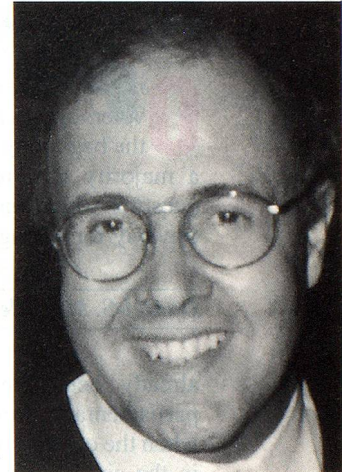
Switzerland is incorrectly called a confederation, which means an alliance. It is in fact a federal state, a single entity divided up into parts enjoying controlled autonomy. But it owes much to its cantons. Historically speaking, they built the Switzerland of today. When we look more closely, it became a nation state only after 1848, when a substantial number of the powers which used to be cantonal were handed over to Berne. And the cantons are also the most manifest expression of Swiss federalism, which reflects differences actually existing within the country. It brings each citizen nearer to a seat of power. It allows minorities to be part of the whole. And it ensures flexible application of laws approved at the national level.

But it is also true – particularly during the last few years – that the cantons have de facto delegated so much of their power to the central government that they now seem to do little more than carry out its orders. This means that one of the fundamental elements of balance

on which our country rests is being compromised. So it is hardly surprising that today's cantons should be demanding that this balance should be re-established – although this certainly does not mean that they harbour secessionist longings. We see the cantons constituting their own cantonal conference, asking for a better share-out of the state's financial resources, forming regional economic and administrative "alliances", e.g. the "Central Plateau", opening up – for those in a position to do so – cross-border policies, e.g. the "Regione Insubrica" in southern Ticino.

So we are seeing a revival of cantonal institutions including new forms of inter-territorial cooperation, not only within the country but with neighbouring regions of foreign countries. This is happening not only in Switzerland but also to some degree elsewhere in Europe. I am thinking, for example, of the different types of cooperation within the Alpine region. In western Europe at least, this marks a return to a regional way of thinking more flexible than the national one, which is characteristic of the nineteenth century and based on rigid territorial division.

Should we be afraid for national unity, in Switzerland or elsewhere? I do not think so. Because the Europe of regions (with the Swiss cantons as a dynamic force) should not be seen as opposed to the Europe of the nation state but rather as complementary to it. That at least is what we hope.



Giuseppe Rusconi

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