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Autor: Cotti, Flavio / Tschanz, Pierre-André

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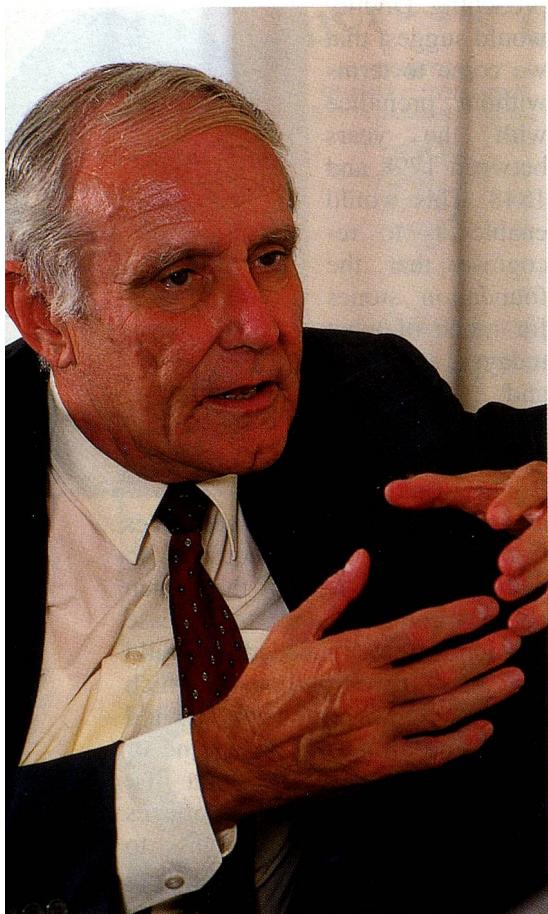
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Interview with President of the Confederation Flavio Cotti

“Resolving our difficulties in ~~co~~ harmony with the international ~~co~~



President of the Confederation 1998,
Flavio Cotti. (Photo: Michael Stahl)

1998 will be a very important year for Switzerland because we shall be commemorating the 150th anniversary of the federal state. We could have also commemorated the 200th anniversary of the Helvetic Republic or even the 350th of the Treaty of Westphalia, which set the seal on Switzerland's sovereignty. So why is 1848 the only date taken into account?

I think you are right; in matters of history, one can put the emphasis where one wishes, but all the same I believe that the essential element for 1998 is the commemoration of the federal constitution of 1848, which was – and not only for Switzerland, I may say for Europe in general – an absolutely vital element of renewal.

And then there is also of course an element of national cohesion which played a role. 1798 is not felt in the same way in all the regions of the country?

Certainly. Nor was the federal constitution created with the unanimity of Swiss citizens, but I believe that today the essential elements do represent a unanimity of consensus within the country. And its creation is therefore an absolutely essential element for our history.

The country is not really in the mood for celebrating. So why insist on another festival?

Listen, a few minutes ago I was rereading a speech I made in 1991 at the opening of the Basle Trade Fair. It contains sentences which could be repeated today: "A country torn apart, a country which has lost its sense of security, etc.". But we must not exaggerate. We certainly have some problems, but we are still one of the most fortunate countries in the world. So let us stop lamenting. Let us look to the future in the consciousness of our difficulties, yes, but also in the knowledge that we have the means of overcoming them if we want to.

You were president of the Confederation in 1991, the year of the 700th anniversary of the Confederation. You are president once again in 1998, the year of the 150th anniversary of the federal state. So your message to the Swiss is "lift up your heads and stop whining"?

That is one of the messages. In 1991 we were commemorating Switzerland as a whole, also with its myths, its traditions which are rather legendary. This time the commemoration will be much more sober because we possess a constitution, we have a political system. These were created in 1848 and they are actually real, with their good sides which are indeed excellent and which also win admiration outside our country. But we also have serious problems in view of the fact that many of our structures have stayed the same while society has been developing constantly and very rapidly.

The 50th anniversary celebrations of the mobilisation in 1989 and the 700th anniversary of the Confederation in 1991 took place in a climate of unease. So what is needed for success in 1998?

You cannot decide to abolish unease or create confidence by federal decree. I think that we are talking here about an attitude, whether of unease or of confidence, which concerns the psychological condition of each individual and also of our society taken as a whole. What we need to do is to try and look objectively and without prejudice at the reality of our situation – with its good points and also the elements which need improvement. But some media channels – which seem to cultivate demagogic and populism alone – may be attractive at first sight like gladiators in the arena, but they do not provide the objective and differentiated view which is necessary for the solution of any problem.

In this connection are you hoping for support from the economic side. The forecasts for 1998 do in fact indicate a return to economic growth, which we have been awaiting for so long...

If this economic growth were also to bring a rapid improvement in the unemployment situation, I would immediately say yes. But we know today that economic growth does not automatically bring job increases in its train. In my opinion, however there must also be an improvement in the employment situation for our society really to get back its self-confidence.

It is said that Switzerland is in an identity crisis. Do you agree with that diagnosis? And what are the reasons for this Swiss malaise?

I could repeat a lot of things that I said about this in 1991. Switzerland – probably during too many decades – never had any doubts about itself. It considered itself to be a special case. In these circumstances the awakening could not be anything other than brutal. Today the country sees that it is no longer the haven of privilege and special qualities which it thought it was. Like all other

complete community"

countries we have our difficulties, and we too will have to resolve them in complete harmony with the international community.

Some people think that national cohesion is under threat. What do you think?

National cohesion represents a permanent challenge in a country like ours with several cultures and languages. I do not want to dramatise. I do not want to say that Switzerland is going to blow up in two years time. But, you see, we have always had a mythical view of national cohesion. We believed that it came down to us from Heaven and the only thing we had to do was to profit from its advantages. But national cohesion can only be the result of deliberate determination, carefully defined, accompanied by concrete action by all the various elements in Switzerland. And this must be a constant process. I have to say that today there is less awareness of the fundamental multicultural and multilingual values which make up the good fortune of this country, and it may also be that those things are losing their importance in the face of globalisation. The English language is perhaps a symbol of this at the linguistic level.

So returning to these values, I imagine, should be one of the main objectives in 1998?

These values are not abstract by any means! One of them is multilingualism. It has to be cultivated. And I sometimes have the impression that we are going in the opposite direction. Our linguistic communities are increasingly living one beside the other instead of trying to understand each other and to deepen their discourse. We are learning our national languages less and less. Italian is the main victim of this phenomenon of estrangement. Less and less do we really know each other in depth. Multiculturalism is much more than living beside each other, respecting each other no doubt but without knowing each other. All this is said without denying the fact that it is necessary for all our young people to learn English. More is

required from the Swiss – from those Swiss, that is, who have reached a certain level of training. This does not of course represent only a sacrifice, because in today's circumstances of life a young person who knows several of the important languages of our European continent is in a very advantageous position in the search for an attractive professional career, a search which is much more difficult than it was for the young people of my generation.

There is need for reform today, and the Federal Council for its part is already engaged in several reform programmes. Let us start with the one concerning the federal constitution. Why was it not decided to undertake a complete revision of our constitution, which is 150 years old? You cannot take a magic wand to revise a constitution which is 150 years old. I am certain that deep-seated revision of a constitution can only be carried out in stages, and that is the reason why the present revision is the beginning of a long process. We are at present engaged in the first stage, and this must be successfully completed first.

How should our system of semi-direct democracy be reformed in order to give us the best opportunities to face up to the challenge of globalisation and interdependence?

I believe that if there is any field in which our democracy should not be subjected to much change it is direct democracy. This is something we possess completely. It is profoundly implanted in the soul of our people. Revisions are certainly possible, with a view to our international com-

mitments in the future, but we must beware of touching the substance of it! What we should do is to make this direct democracy more alive. It is faced with challenges which are getting more difficult all the time because the problems to be resolved are getting more and more complex. This requires an extraordinary effort in terms of objective information. Voters cannot exercise their democratic rights if they are not well informed.

The Federal Council is in the process of reforming the administration. What are the next steps?

This first reform has already brought a number of important changes, such as

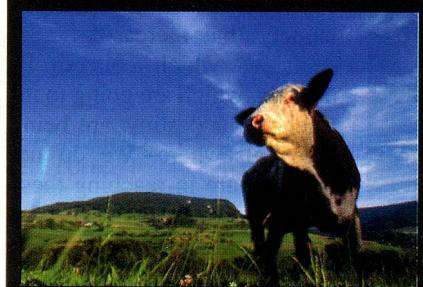
“ MY SWITZERLAND:
I think of Switzerland as safe, clean, comfortable and well organised. Unfortunately it always believes it has to be special. So it doesn't take part in Europe, but in itself it's very multi-cultural.

NINA (18)

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the transfer of the Environment Office from one ministry to another. But I personally am of the opinion that a lot still remains to be done. As I said seven years ago when I was president for the first time, the total and absolute collegial system, as it exists at present, requires a number of corrections. At the moment everyone is talking about strengthening the role of the president. I raised this idea seven years ago, and it earned me quite a lot of criticism. We should keep the collegial system as a basis – nothing else is conceivable in a multicultural and multilingual country – but I think it would be useful to look for ways in which the role of the president could be strengthened. But how do we find the right balance between a president with more powers and a system which must still be fundamentally collegial? Well, I believe that is the work of art which has to be realised over the next few years.

Amongst the big projects launched in connection with the 150th anniversary of the federal constitution is the creation of a Solidarity Fund making it possible to earmark some Sfr. 300 million a year to relieve suffering, in Switzerland and throughout the world, to come to the assistance of victims of human rights violations, etc. This project is praiseworthy, but Switzerland all alone... Is this not like a drop of water in the ocean?



When we are talking about ideals, even a drop of water may be very important.

Are there not other countries which could follow our example if such a foundation is created?

If other countries follow, it will be a few more drops of water – which can only be a good thing.

The launching of this project in the context of the controversy about Switzerland's attitude and role during and after the Second World War caused much negative reaction. Is it something stemming from bad conscience?

I do not believe it is, even though it cannot be denied that the idea was indeed born out of the controversy about Switzerland's position during the Second World War. But it is not a question of bad conscience. It is an act of solidarity and generosity on the part of this country, which is all the more justified by the fact, as I said earlier, that ours is a privileged country.

The Swiss authorities have publicly expressed their regret and presented their apologies for the fact that thousands of refugees seeking to escape the Nazi regime were turned away. Has Switzerland nothing else to reproach itself for?

I believe that an objective evaluation of the role of our country during the Second World War will bring to light mistakes which were certainly made by Switzerland, alongside a whole series of elements which are objectively positive. There will never be a picture which is only black and white. My personal conviction for the moment is that Switzerland's global balance-sheet during the Second World War remains absolutely positive, in spite of the mistakes I have mentioned. But it will be for the Bergier Commission, set up as a result of our common determination at the end of 1996, to give a better founded response to this. We should not talk too much about 'truth', because there is no such thing as absolute truth in history. But I am certain that the Bergier Commission

also will, in the context of this balance sheet, arrive at a result which is globally positive for Switzerland.

The European Union is going to launch the Euro at the beginning of 1999. What does this mean for Switzerland?

The problem of the Euro could become one that is absolutely symbolic. The Swiss have the same attitude to it as they had to the European Economic Community all those years ago. Many people did not believe in it, thinking that those disputes between Europeans would get the upper hand and that it would therefore fail. Today there are still many Swiss who do not really believe that the Euro will ever happen. They speculate on the idea that in the end the countries of the European Union will not be able to agree. I for my part am convinced that the Euro will come, and that it will provide a glaring demonstration of what I have been stating untiringly, namely that increasingly the decisions which concern us directly, which are going to influence our destiny, are being taken elsewhere. We do not take a share in reaching these

decisions, but we suffer the consequences and have to pay the price of them. However, the Euro may well open the eyes of many Swiss citizens, because Switzerland is a financial power! I only hope that this realisation will not weigh too heavily on our economic reality... Who knows what will happen to the Swiss franc? If, as some people predict, it skyrockets as a result, the whole of Switzerland will suffer the consequences, particularly with respect to difficulties in exporting.

“

MY SWITZERLAND:

Switzerland has an awkward school system. Every municipality regulates schooldays and holidays differently. I like it that we speak several languages and that our country is small enough to grasp.

DOMINIK (10)

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The government and yourself are pleading for Switzerland to participate in the big international organisations, particularly the United Nations and the European Union. What would be the timetable for joining them?

With respect to the United Nations the Federal Council is prepared when the time comes to submit to voters a new proposal for joining. In addition, there is already a popular initiative to this end. We believe that this will be very useful, since the gathering of signatures will indicate the amount of awareness there is about this amongst the public. But the issue of the European Union is of course more important for us, because although we are not actually in the UN we do participate in all its collateral organisations. We are present financially, and we are in very close cooperation with the UN. We have simply deprived ourselves of a share in decision-making... The European Union is more important, because that is really a question of the future of us all.

The government has had to face several rejections by voters of projects concerning Switzerland's international commitment. How does it intend to convince the people?

I do not think there is any particular recipe for success. We have to pursue the dialogue, send clear signals and hope that public opinion will develop. In fact I am sure that at the moment this is already the case, and that our arguments





will win. In the interest of the country, I hope this will happen as soon as possible.

Our geo-political environment has completely changed since 1989, and neutrality has lost its value. In the discussions about Switzerland's commitment abroad, ought we not also to consider the idea of joining NATO?

I do not believe that neutrality has lost all its value. Naturally it does not have the same importance as in the days of bipolarity. But I remain of the opinion that it can continue to play an essential role on condition that we are talking about active neutrality and not neutrality in the narrow sense, closed in upon itself, and that it is reflected by initiatives at the international level, by a clear expression of solidarity and particularly also by views which are clear and well expressed, whether this pleases the subjects of them or not. It was in fact the 1993 report on foreign policy which enabled us to launch a more active and more dynamic foreign policy in the framework of neutrality. In addition, neutrality – and this was demonstrated with our presidency of the OSCE – gives us a certain air of impartiality

which can play a major role in our international relations.

And joining NATO?

I exclude it, because it would be incompatible with neutrality. The hard kernel of neutrality is precisely a prohibition on participation in military alliances as well as in any armed conflict whose aim is not limited to the defence of our territory and of Swiss neutrality itself.

In your quality as president of the Confederation in the 150th anniversary year of the federal state, what do you desire for Switzerland?

I have three fundamental wishes: that it is able to resolve, or start resolving, its present financial problems while at the same time safeguarding a social security system which seems to me to be at the very base of consensus in this country; that it is able to cultivate multilingualism much more and that the cantons are called upon to act in this sense; and thirdly I would like Switzerland, in its own obvious, clear and incontestable interest, to open itself up to international organisations, and particularly to open itself up to the European Union.

Interview: Pierre-André Tschanz ■

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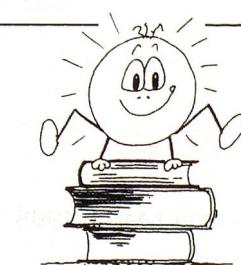
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