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CONTENTS

Forum

Economic areas instead of cantons?

Culture

Switzerland's refurbished Transport Museum

Official News**History**

Switzerland's churches in the Second World War

Politics

To safeguard the future of the social security system

Votes

Federal votes on June 7, 1998

14/15

Mosaic

16/17

Ping-Pong

A young man's thoughts on Switzerland

18

SSA News

19

Cover:

Traffic, industry, tourism, education and science – more and more areas require cooperation crossing cantonal borders. Economic areas are emerging which have to regulate their relationship with federal Berne.
(Montage: Markus Senn)



A little while ago somebody asked me what canton I came from. I answered proudly: "Soleure: can't you hear it?" But people have started to complain, now and then, of "Kantönligeist", the tendency to see little beyond the narrow limits of one's canton. Others suggest that the narrow horizons, the unwieldiness and high cost of the cantons are no longer appropriate in a time of global markets. Some even call for the country to have between 5 and 7 powerful economic regions rather than 26 cantons.

What benefits would there be if Switzerland had 5 to 7 new administrative units instead of the 26 historic cantons which have grown up over the years? And what penalties? The only way to answer the first of those questions would be to risk a trial. I should like to answer the second by calling to mind the significance of the cantons today.

It is true that the federal government has been given more and more responsibilities in the course of the past 150 years. In the last few years moreover many regional, inter-cantonal and supra-cantonal forms of cooperation have been developed, crossing borders freely. These have led to the emergence of regions and economic areas which do not correspond in the first instance to cantonal borders. But an important range of responsibilities (e.g. procedural law, and cantonal construction and tax law) and above all executive powers have stayed in cantonal hands.

When there is a birth, a marriage or a death, and in innumerable other situations, people turn to their cantons. They know the

competent authority, the authority knows the cantons. The small size of the canton makes it easier to take into account grumbles and preferences. The canton can also keep its eye on the municipalities. Representatives of the canton are to be found too in federal bodies. Through his attachment to his canton the citizen's vote gains great weight at elections and in referendums at all three levels of our commonwealth.

The canton acts also as an interface for the political structure, cohesion and equilibrium of that multicultural Switzerland which exists by an act of its own will. Our country emerged cautiously over centuries. A federal state grew gradually out of municipalities and cantons. And yet we still feel ourselves to be citizens of a canton and of a municipality.

Replacing the cantons by six or seven technocratic administrative units would be an operation of extraordinary significance for the daily life of citizens and the national politics of the whole country. Would there really be savings? Would the administrative units be less cumbersome? Have the demands of the modern world not already found a response in the existence of the federation and the various overarching forms of cooperation which I have mentioned? "I come from the Mittelland administrative unit; can't you hear it?" How does that sound?



IMPRESSUM

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Robert Nyffeler