

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 34 (1971)
Heft: [10]

Artikel: Local Government in Switzerland
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942272>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 21.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SWITZERLAND

THE FIRST THING that emerges from a study of Swiss "local government" is that it is in fact a blurred notion. To a Swiss, a cantonal government is not a local government: The cantonal government is **the** government; the canton, **the** state; Switzerland itself being known as the Confederation. Yet by United Kingdom standards, few cantons have the population even of a large county. Basing ourselves on the figures of the 1960 census (whose data will be used in the following), only Zurich and Berne have a population of the order of one million. Vaud, the third largest canton, is smaller than Wiltshire, the remainder very much smaller again. Appenzell Inner Rhodes, with 12,943, had some 5000 fewer than Radnorshire. Nine cantons have less than 100,000 inhabitants, a figure which British authorities consider as hopelessly small, because it entails relative administrative inexpertness and poverty of resources. But the status and power of a Swiss canton is incomparably greater than that of an English county. Even outside the important fields of government, which are left mainly to them, the cantons enjoy considerable powers on the Federal level. Constitutional revision not only requires the support of the majority of the people, but that of the majority of cantons as well.

During recent decades the Federal Government has steadily been acquiring new powers and nationally organised interest groups now rival the cantons in their influence over policy. The cantons nevertheless have their own citizenship, professional qualifications, banks and churches. Subject to certain safeguards, the Constitution still permits them to make treaties with foreign states on matters within their competence. Under delegated powers, they have a greater share of the administration of local army units than English police authorities have in running their police forces. Prisoners are still "extradited" from one canton to another. The President of the Greater Council might still review the year and refer to world crisis at the annual meeting as though his canton was still the power it was during the Thirty Year War.

A cantonal government is in many ways a **government**, as opposed to a local authority. The cantons are still consulted on economic affairs and social security and, as a rule, execute any legislation. Cantonal governments have many of the functions of a Ministry of Agriculture, a Board of Trade, a Ministry of Labour and a Ministry of Social Services. Criminal and civil codes may be a matter for the Federation, the administration of justice and prisons is largely under the cantons. The Federal Tribunal is mainly appellate in character. The federal police is concerned with aliens, espionage, treason, forensic science and the like. As for fields traditionally associated with local govern-

ment in the United Kingdom — education, health, welfare, highways, planning — the cantonal department is very much a ministry whose relations with federal authorities can be quite remote. Even when a canton is executing federal legislation, it usually has a free hand within certain basic principles. In particular, the organisation, control and supervision of education at all levels is entirely left to the cantons, even though the existence of national examinations and governmental co-ordination may impose some uniformity. With the exception of two Federal Institutes of Technology, all the higher educational establishments of Switzerland are the cantons' responsibility.

As a result of their privileged position, cantons and communes command a total budget which is over twice that of the federal budget. This contrasts with the situation in Great Britain, where the expenditure of local governments amounts to not much more than half that of the Central Government. The political context of local government is entirely different in the two countries, as exemplified by the declaration of a Swiss citizen: "In erster Linie bin ich Bürger von Thalwil, in zweiter Linie Zürcher und weil ich Bürger von Thalwil und ein Zürcher bin, bin ich Schweizer".

THE STRUCTURE OF A CANTON

Every canton has its own constitution, but they all have common administrative characteristics. This permits us to take one canton, Graubunden, as an example.

This canton, the largest in area in Switzerland, had a population of 147,000 in 1960. Its present constitution dates from 1892 and has been altered since by very few amendments. It is based on the sovereignty of the people as a whole and all matters of principle are subject to an obligatory popular referendum. These matters include changes in the constitution itself, treaties (usually with other cantons), basic statutes (such as those on civil status) and administrative statutes or resolution instituting additional cantonal authorities or entailing the expenditure of over 100,000 francs. Swiss administrators often take a chance in exceeding the rather dated limits of expenditure not subject to referendum and in making use of subordinate legislation not subject to it. However, referenda and initiatives are far from being a dead letter and the citizens of Chur have to go to the polls up to ten times a year.

The Great Council of 113 members meet twice a year for several days at a time in a fine new hall seldom used for any other purpose. Its main functions are to settle the estimates, fix the taxes and deal with matters requiring legislation. It also elects certain officials such as those of the Cantonal Bank and the judges of the administrative court. Since 1944 it elects committees for education and health with advisory roles. Any "minister's" proposals however come to the Great Council through the **Kleiner Rat** or Cabinet, whose members are elected by the people and

who form part of the executive while at the same time wielding considerable influence over the legislature. All members of the Great Council but one are elected in the name of a party, but the tendency is to share out authority and rule by discussion and consent. The balance between the parties is maintained in the third named organ of a triumvirate formed by the people, the Great Council and the Kleiner Rat. The latter has five full-time and salaried ministers responsible to and chosen by the people. They are ineligible for membership of the Great Council but play an important part in its debates. Each is elected for a term of three years and is only twice eligible for re-election. The Presidency and Vice-Presidency of the Kleiner Rat are held in rotation, for the retiring President cannot remain in office for a second consecutive year. Each minister is allotted a department. These are at present the departments of Justice and Police, the Interior and Economy, Works and Forestry, Finance and the Army, Education and Health. All decisions are, however, taken by the Council as a whole. The Kleiner Rat is in fact responsible for the management of the cantonal state. It decides on all political and administrative matters without prejudice to the further authority of the Great Council, with the exception of matters reserved to the Great Council alone. They appoint almost all cantonal administrative officials and only have to "consider" the proposals of the health and education committees.

NEWS OF THE COLONY

Taranaki Swiss Social Club

Obituaries

Mrs Luisa Katherina Schwyter

August 23rd was a sad day for many Swiss when Mrs Luisa Schwyter passed away at Stratford in her 78th year.

Mrs Schwyter was housekeeping for many years for the Priests at Opunake who all enjoyed her company and her charming accent. She arrived in New Zealand in 1939 with her family from Baar, Canton Zug. During the last 10 years of her life she has been actively engaged in mission work for her church while keeping house for her brother Mr Jacob Schumacher, Stratford.

Mrs Schwyter leaves two daughters, Mrs F. Suter (Eltham) and Mrs C. Baker (Porirua), 20 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

—L.K.