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# HOW SWITZERLAND IS GOVERNED\*

by

REGINALD LANGFORD

Continuity is preserved at all times; there is no national upheaval every few years as in the United States or Britain; no constant uncertainty as in France; no political disinheritance of those citizens who are "agin" the winning party which in other democracies grabs all the power and all the political key offices with the object of wielding a kind of party dictatorship; no jockeying or parliamentary sabotage by a frustrated opposition and consequently no wastage of good oppositional brains; no glamorised political personality cult with televised smiles and honeyed words and promises — indeed, most Swiss have to make an effort to recall the name of their current President; and, above all, no sudden ousting of good men from high-rank offices with which they have only just had time to get familiar.

"The Swiss are averse to investing any one man or body of men with more than a minimum of authority, and their Federal Council is nothing but the very humble servant of the two-chamber Parliament."

At the last annual election of the Council of Seven there were no fewer than four vacancies to be filled: two resignations for reasons of age, two others on health grounds.

Yet even then the term "Government crisis" so freely used in the Press of other countries would have been completely out of place. The political parties nominated their best men, and these were elected by Parliament with one eye on the strength of each party's representation on the Council, and the other on equitable distribution of seats to the German, French and Italian speaking groups.

All in all, a commonsensical system that serves its purpose admirably and makes the Swiss wonder why other countries find it necessary to make such a fuss about their top-level elections.

They themselves are averse to investing any one man, or body of men, with more than a minimum of authority, and their Federal Council is nothing but the very humble servant of the two-chamber Parliament: the Council of States, whose members represent the cantons (two for each), and the National Council, directly chosen by the people in general election.

"The sovereign will of the people can still override the decisions of their duly elected rulers."

All the decisions of the Federal Council are taken collectively, and all have to pass both chambers; otherwise back they go for amendment.

But the sovereign will of the people can still override the decisions of their duly elected rulers.

Every constitutional amendment requires ratification by a popular and a cantonal majority, for a referendum on any law can be demanded in a petition signed by 30,000 voters; and by the system of initiative 50,000 citizens can require the submission of any desired law to the usual legislative process.

The free play of party politics, just as active and controversial in Switzerland as anywhere else, takes place in the lower strata of the pyramid — in the



Bern — The old and picturesque quarter of the capital.  
(Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office.)

cantons, towns, and communes, where the male adult Swiss is called upon to cast his personal vote not merely when electing his representative to Parliament every four or five years (the term varies locally), but several times a year on such matters as public expenditure, the appointment of school teachers, judges and pastors, and a host of minor questions affecting the life of the body politic.

\* The first part of this article appeared in our last issue and is reproduced by courtesy of "Swissair Gazette".

Thus drawn into political activity at the age of 20 (at which age he also becomes a soldier practically for life), able to view at close quarters the tangible results, good or bad, of his own and his fellow-citizens' personal decisions, the young man is schooled to take a direct part and responsibility in the government of his country.

In view of all this political common sense, the stranger finds it hard to understand why the Swiss should for so long have withheld the vote from their womenfolk.

"Emancipation will probably make little practical difference when it comes, for Switzerland will always remain essentially a man's country."

There are two main reasons for this:

(1) The male Swiss regards politics as his own domain. A woman's place, he holds, is in the home, from where she cannot be expected to keep in touch with public affairs. Her vote would therefore be worthless.

Anyhow politics is a dirty business at best, and therefore women should keep out.

(2) Since women are not allowed to vote, the men have had it all their own way when they went to the polls on the issue.

But women's franchise is now on its way. Three French-speaking cantons in the West (Neuchâtel, Vaud and Geneva) have already consented — *toujours la politesse!* — and it will not be long before the German-Swiss cantons start following suit. In a decade or so all Swiss women may well possess the same political privileges as their menfolk, even on the Federal plane.

But emancipation will probably make little practical difference when it comes, for Switzerland will always remain essentially a man's country.

"It took me several years to find out how Switzerland was really governed."

When I first came to Switzerland many years ago I asked what kind of government they had. Coming straight from Ireland, I felt I ought to be "agin it". (The joke is an old one now, but it was brand-new in those days, only I was too inexperienced to nail down the copyright.)

Seriously, it took me several years to find out how Switzerland was really governed. During that time I tried my best to be "agin it", but in the end gave it up as a bad job; there's no fun in running your head against a foam-rubber wall whichever way you turn.

One of the most frustrating things about the Swiss Government in this connection is the fact that it governs almost entirely without the help of Press. (To my knowledge, it is the only 100 per cent democratic government in the world to do so.)

Now, the freedom of the Swiss Press is solidly guaranteed by the Federal Constitution, and in practice as well it is at liberty to have a smack at the Government whenever it likes.

"The foam-rubber system takes the heart out of even the most fiery political writer."

Indeed, every good Swiss, whatever his political party, does just this whenever he feels in the mood, thus upholding one of the most sacred privileges of democracy.

But the foam-rubber system takes the heart out of even the most fiery political writer. The leading papers all over the country are party-bound; and the Government, as already stated, is a permanent coalition.

This makes it hard for, say, a Liberal or a Socialist paper to hit out at either the Government as a whole or at any particular member of the Federal Council, since decisions by the latter are the collective voice of all its seven members.

Thus the blow is just as likely to his one's own party-man as an opponent.



Bern — The Onion Market.  
(Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office.)

The Swiss journalists are constantly complaining that news from the "Bundeshaus" (the Federal Palace in Berne) reaches them too slowly and sparsely for adequate reporting.

They also complain that the individual Federal Councillors are apt to be too secretive towards pressmen and never give them a proper break.

Were I a Federal Councillor, I too would be very chary of letting a newspaperman see into my cards!

Of the 500-odd Swiss papers and periodicals carrying political news, no more than a couple of dozen are party-wise "neutral", so that the Councillor who sticks his neck out is liable to be exposed to attack from all points of the political compass except his own.

In any case, it is an unwritten rule that he must never — or at least not too often — make himself conspicuous as an "active" politician.

"Only fellow-citizens on whose graves the grass has been greening for 50 years or more can qualify for the epitaph: 'Great Swiss'."

This is in his own personal interest, for otherwise he would be suspected of growing ambitious, of desiring to become a personality; and the Swiss, as already



mentioned, have no time for the personality cult in politics. (Only fellow-citizens on whose graves the grass has been greening for fifty years or more can qualify for the epitaph "great Swiss".)

Any attempt on the part of a politician in office to increase his stature above the heads of his contemporaries is publicly regarded as suspect. If he persists, he loses his head — figuratively, of course.

Familiarity breeds contempt, says the proverb, and most Swiss are not consciously aware of the invaluable asset they possess in their resilient, uncrushable, low-powered Government, popularly known as "Berne".

For the citizen, "Berne" has the same function as the punching-ball for the boxer — a patient target for lefts, rights, uppercuts and hooks; and it can't hit back. "Berne" is the cause of everything that goes wrong inside and outside the life of the individual and the community.

Whether it does something or fails to do it, "Berne" is never right. In short, "Berne" is an institution that holds the citizens, the cantons and the parties together; however heatedly opinions may differ in anything else, every dispute dissolves into harmony as soon as someone in the party starts grousing at "Berne".

If "Berne" did not already exist, it ought to be invented. After all, there's no religion anywhere on earth without a Satan in some form or other, and he has a very valuable function to perform in the minds of believers.

"The Swiss system of Government is perhaps the only one that functions both smoothly and democratically."

Clever politicians of various nationalities, and even illustrious statesmen, have asserted in mellow after-dinner speeches that the Swiss system of government is an ideal form of democracy which all free nations might do well to emulate.

I agree with them entirely in that I regard the Swiss model, despite its numerous imperfections, as perhaps the only one that functions both smoothly and democratically.

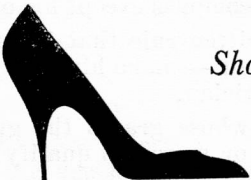
But the solution is not so simple as that. Government in a free democracy is the result of evolution and tradition, and these are based on history and character.

The process of any political revolution, on the other hand, is seldom less damnable than the evils which it sets out to remedy.

I have heard Switzerland called pretty well everything from a political museum piece to the most efficiently functioning democracy in the world.

Despite the seeming contradiction in terms, I fully endorse both these definitions.

A moment's reflection on contemporary world affairs will reveal that the one by no means precludes the other.




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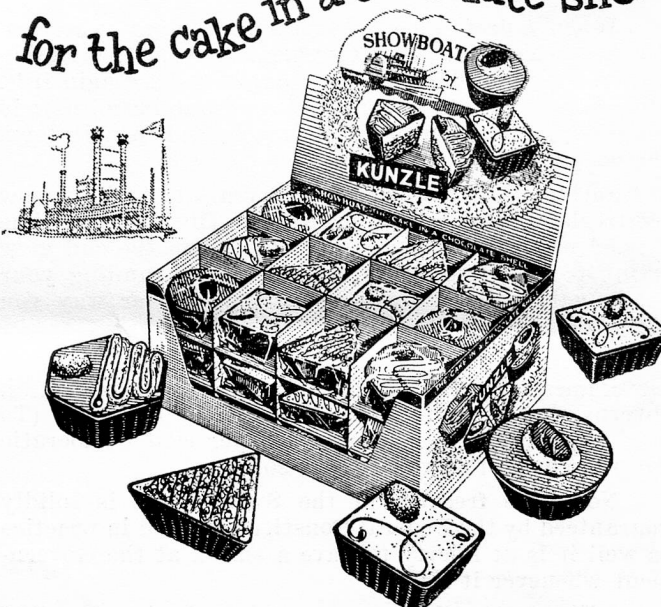
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