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THE VERBAND ÖFFENTLICHER VERKEHR (UNION OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT COMPANIES) HELD A CONFERENCE IN APPENZEL ON 28/08/03.

THE MAIN CONCLUSION FROM THIS WAS THAT PUBLIC TRANSPORT (ÖFFENTLICHER VERKEHR) IS BETTER SERVED WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF COMPANIES PROVIDING THE SERVICES.

MICHAEL WILD DID THE TRANSLATION, MANY THANKS MICHAEL.

THE EDITOR THEN CUT IT TO RIBBONS!

In particular they rejected the suggestion from the Federation (national Government) that SBB take over all the standard gauge independent companies and that narrow gauge companies be combined into one or perhaps a few companies. That is not to say restructuring is not required; it is, but the conclusion was that it should not be along federal lines.

Since 1997 the number of railway companies has dropped from 58 to 41 and there is little doubt that this process will continue as a result of financial and also political pressures. The Government's suggestion would not, in the view of the VöV, result in a better, more attractive and cheaper regional transport. How could it?

The VöV is also alarmed by the Government's programme designed to relieve central government of its' public transport obligations. There are no financial guarantees (in the literal sense) and the SBB would be unable to match supply and demand. Development of S-Bahns are under threat in Geneva and Ticino also St Gallen and central Switzerland and Zürich's second main through station. The network requires a new reliable long-term financial structure.

You can see the VöV's point. Moving the obligations to regions at the same time as centralising the system and then not providing financial guarantees does not seem to be logical.

The president of the VöV, Walter Hermann, highlighted in his speech the lack of a financial safety net. The other challenge was seen as competition.

The economy measures being introduced by the Government were hitting public transport, although regions were making up some of the shortfall. The SBB, in particular, were losing a large proportion of its subsidy leading to the threat mentioned above to proposals already voted for by the local population. Remember that in Switzerland taxation, allocation of revenue and voting works from the local Gemeinde upwards, not like the UK where the opposite applies.

Dr Peter Vollmer, the VöV's director, also made a wide-ranging speech, which was designed to be provocative though carrying a serious message. Swiss public transport must not descend into being a battleground, a hotbed of ideology or a victim of public service cuts. He came out firmly against a union or takeover of the KTU by the SBB. The KTU is what we would think of independent (albeit largely Canton owned) railways. He agreed with the Federal aims of increasing efficiency, upping quality of service, enhanced competitiveness and also harmonisation with other European networks. He did not concur with their methods of achieving them. In 1996 the law was changed and designed to devolve equipment and service decisions to undertakings. In practice the opposite has happened because the Federal Government has increased regulation and cantons have become intimately involved in the ordering process. The carriers, having no economic or system responsibilities merely fulfil their obligations. Now where have we come across that before?

Government sees only size; undertakings are unable to withstand takeovers because they are not strong enough to hold back highly organised outside bids. The Swiss system is in danger, despite being the envy of the entire world. Regional passenger traffic is the lynchpin of the system and is being subsumed. Harmonisation of the financial structure of the KTU with that of the SBB, in particular the problem of their pension funds, is essential but only to provide a level playing field from where reform can be effected in an independent way.

The achievements of the public transport system are an essential pre-requisite in solving the problems of trans-Alpine traffic, suburban traffic and the environment. An effectively run public transport system guarantees the high quality of the Swiss economy and tourism through diversity and choice.

And so say all of us.

For more information check out the VöV's website: www.voev.ch / www.utp.ch , the latter being in French. The source documents are now in the archives.