The swiss political tradition

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THE SWISS POLITICAL TRADITION.

WILLIAM E. RAPPARD,
Director of the Graduate Institute of International Studies.

Switzerland is one of the smallest countries of Europe. Her population is about four-fifths that of Scotland — that is, appreciably less than that of London. Her area is less than two-thirds that of the Irish Free State. Furthermore, her territory is entirely land-locked. She is and ever has been a republic. And English is not one of her four national languages. How is it, then, that the British should care at all about such a tiny and such a strange land? I know that a great many of you have come to my country for its scenery, for its blue lakes, for its old cities and its snow mountains. I have, of course, no quarrel whatever with those of you for whom Switzerland is but a picturesque playground. But I should like to show you that it is something more. That should not be too difficult a task. Your traditions of citizenship prepare you to understand and appreciate ours. This has been proved again and again by the many penetrating studies which English people have written on Swiss institutions. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that we owe it to British and also to American authors more than to any other foreigners that we have learnt to see ourselves as others see us.

First of all, I think that as a political commonwealth Switzerland is of general interest to the world to-day because of what she is: a small country, ten times less peopled that the least peopled of our three mighty neighbours, Germany, France and Italy: a nation divided into three main linguistic groups, each speaking the language of one of these neighbours: and a state which, in spite of these circumstances, has been independent for over six centuries, has followed a political evolution quite its own, and has been led to adopt institutions radically different from those of all other European countries.

Such is the Swiss Confederation, to-day more firmly established than ever, standing on the rock of the common devotion and of the same love of freedom of all its German-French- and Italian-speaking citizens. Surely a political miracle, which, if it could only be reproduced on a European or on a world scale, would bring peace, prosperity and contentment to the whole of our unfortunate human race!

Let us look a little more closely at the facts of this Swiss miracle. Her population is made up as follows: over 70 per cent. of the Swiss speak as their mother tongue a German dialect, over 20 per cent. French, over 5 per cent. Italian, and over 1 per cent. Romansch, the survival of a Latin tongue still prevailing in certain Alpine valleys. About 57 per cent. of the Swiss are Protestant and 41 Catholic. Fortunately, the internal frontiers which separate the confessional, the linguistic and also the social and economic groups do not run along the same lines, but cut across each other. There are German-Swiss and French-Swiss Protestants and Catholics, there are German-Swiss and French-Swiss, there are Protestant and Catholic mountaineers, peasants and city dwellers. So no group has a majority which would allow it to lay down the law irrespective of the preferences of the others. The German-Swiss and the Protestants are numerically preponderant, but the German-speaking Protestants alone are in a minority, and so on.

The Swiss cantons have 'shown the world how Germans, Frenchmen and Italians, if only they respect each other's liberties as they would have their own respected, may by mutual helpfulness and forbearance build up a union at once stable and free.' That is a sentence from Woodrow Wilson, written in 1896, when he was professor of politics.

Compare it with your King's recent declaration at Winnipeg on Empire Day last: 'The sense of race,'' His Majesty said, 'may be a dangerous and disruptive force, but English and French have shown in Canada that they can keep the pride and distinctive culture which it inspires, while yet combining to establish a broader freedom and security than either could have achieved alone.' The respect for human liberty, the virtues of mutual toleration and the conscious subordination of the might of the State to the rights of the individual, are the essential factors which explain the success of the Swiss experiment. Are they not also the secret of the common loyalty of His Britannic Majesty's subjects all over the world, irrespective of race, speech and creed?

Self-government and political freedom are held to be essentially British in the British Commonwealth of Nations, and essentially Swiss in Switzerland. It is natural, then, that when you come within the shadow of our Alps, just as when we land on your shores, we should both become conscious of a true similarity of political temperament.

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How is it that, in spite of their internal diversities, the Swiss people have become and have remained one nation? Switzerland was founded and ruled for over five centuries by the German-Swiss alone. For the whole of that time the French- and Italian-speaking population, who have since become their fellow-countrymen, were either their subjects or their allies. This fact, combined with the continued numerical preponderance of the German-speaking Swiss, explains why they can afford to be generous in their dealings with their younger French- and Italian-speaking compatriots. And their political wisdom, born of long experience in administering their own affairs, combined with the solidarity, which as explained unites the confessional and linguistic minorities, explains why they have not abused their power.

The fact is that our national unity is constantly being preserved and fostered by the deliberate practice of decentralisation, local self-government or, as we say in Switzerland, of federalism. Like the United States or Canada, but on a very much reduced scale, Switzerland is a political federation. The twenty-two autonomous cantons are the more attached to each other and to their common fatherland as they are less interfered with in the pursuit of their individual destinies. Here again I find one of the clues of the sympathetic understanding with which the British have long considered Switzerland and her problems. To explain national unity in terms of local liberty is, to the average Frenchman, German or Italian, a paradox, if not an absurdity. To the average Englishman, on the contrary, as to the average Swiss, it is commonsense verified by historical experience. There would be no more national unity in Switzerland if the German-speaking canton of Basle, the French-speaking canton of Geneva and the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino were all governed by and from Berne, the national capital, than there would be British loyalty in the British Commonwealth of Nations if Canada, Australia and South Africa were governed by and from Whitehall.

We Swiss love our country and are prepared to make every sacrifice in defence of our national independence, not only because it is our country but because we love freedom and because we realise that our national independence is the best safeguard of our local and individual liberties.

I should be less than candid, however, if I failed to call attention to the difficulties which arise from our desire to remain our own masters locally, while being and asserting ourselves as one people nationally. Those difficulties of adjustment between the duties and the rights of the federal state on the one hand and those of the so-called sovereign cantons on the other are particularly acute at the present time. The greater the international tension, the more exacting the demands of national security. Now national security means, in the first instance, a powerful national army, in the second instance, an adequate national revenue, and in the third a strong unified economic policy. All these make for national centralisation, and against cantonal liberty. There is no question, therefore, but that the present age — and that is in our eyes one of its many tragedies — is tending to sacrifice the local autonomy of the Swiss cantons on the altar of the national military and economic necessities of the Swiss federal state.

The greater and the more cruel this sacrifice, the more fervent the attachment of the Swiss cantons to what remains of their own domain. This domain is still extremely important, since it includes all church affairs, practically the whole of public education from the primary school to the university, by far the larger part of the administration of justice, and all local public works. In order to meet their responsibilities in those various fields, the cantons have reserved to themselves the right of direct taxation, whereas the federal state depends for its income mainly on customs revenue.

So far I have spoken of Switzerland in her political aspects without as yet using the word 'democracy.' Why? Certainly not because Switzerland is not a democratic country, but because I feel that abroad she is perhaps sometimes thought of too exclusively as such. Still, I'm going to end up by talking about aspects of Swiss democracy which, I think, are likely to interest you most in Great Britain to-day.

Switzerland has been a democracy in the traditional sense of the word for over a hundred years — that is, for over a hundred years her government has rested on universal manhood suffrage. Switzerland is often defined as the cradle of democracy. Ever since the Middle Ages and up to the present day the smaller Alpine cantons have exercised their own sovereignty in an annual open-air gathering of all male citizens. These gatherings are known as Landesgemeinde, and it is the Landesgemeinde which give Switzerland the reputation of being the oldest democracy in the world. Still I don't want to disguise the fact that by the end of the eighteenth century most of the cantons were in the hands of a limited number of privileged families and that even the so-called Alpine democracies showed no eagerness whatever to extend the rights of their traditional burgesses to their more recently immigrated neighbours and to their subjects, who had come to be the majority of the population.

Swiss democracy, then, in its present form, rests on a double foundation. It is built, on the one hand, upon liberal traditions of self-government, which go back to the Middle Ages, and, on the other, upon the egalitarian doctrines of Rousseau and of the French Revolution, which abolished all privileges of birth and place.

A number of democratic devices of government, which have since been imitated in other countries, were tried out first in Switzerland. The initiative, the referendum and proportional representation — these were all applied in Switzerland to make government more truly responsive to the will of the people. Whether they have succeeded in doing this is an open question, and too complex to be discussed here.

There's one aspect of our democratic institutions which often surprises and even shocks British observers: that all attempts up to now to introduce women's suffrage here have failed. It seems strange that the country in which all male citizens have been allowed to vote for over a hundred years should still refuse that privilege to the fairer sex. But I have it on the authority of one of the leading Swiss suffragettes that this situation is due to feminine reluctance much more than to masculine intolerance. The great bulk of Swiss population is of middle-class stock. Women's suffrage is the child of the drawing-room and of the factory, rather than of the home. Still the women of Switzerland will get the vote as soon as they overcome their aversion to getting it, and I should be very much surprised if our daughters, or at least our daughters' daughters, were still to deny themselves the status of active citizenship in Switzerland.

I want to end by saying a word about Swiss democracy in relation to our army. Our system of national defence has always been based on what you in Great Britain call conscription, but which we refer to as universal compulsory military service. The exposed position of our country and our small population have obliged us to resort to this system: no other would allow us to mobilise an army of several hundred thousand trained men. But quite apart from its military and financial advantages, we have for generations been accustomed to consider compulsory service as an essential element of our democracy.

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One cannot deny that an efficient army, based on strict military discipline, with the authoritarian leadership above and the implicit obedience below which that implies, it not in itself an essentially democratic institution. However, it is without any intention to seem paradoxical that I declare that there is no other institution in Switzerland which so powerfully fosters the feeling and the practice of social democracy as the army. For a few months, at the age of twenty, and for two or three weeks a year until middle age, all able-bodied Swiss, whether they are the sons of bankers or farmers, factory workers or university dons, are subjected to exactly the same mode of life in the barracks or in army manœuvres in the country. Although the time spent with the colours is too strenuous to be looked upon as a pleasant vacation by most Swiss soldiers, none of us who have been through the military mill would miss the experience or be without its memories and comradeships. We have, of course, a limited number of professional soldiers to instruct recruits and man the permanent fortifications, but our military defence rests essentially on an army made up of all able-bodied citizens between the ages of twenty and sixty.

As I say, I have no doubt that our unanimous co-operation in the one task of preparing for the defence of our country against external aggression has done more to stimulate what I want to call the democratic patriotism of the Swiss people than any other single factor. A professional army, made up of those whom you call volunteers and whom we usually call mercenaries, would, as we see it, present a far greater threat to political freedom than an army officered and manned by our citizenship. The Swiss army is not only the most popular of Swiss public institutions, but it is probably also more popular with the Swiss people than is any other army with its own people abroad.

All this has never seemed so obvious as to-day. Anti-militarism, which was formerly preached in certain political quarters, has completely disappeared under the threat of recent developments beyond the Rhine and the Alps. Our national army is less contested in principle to-day than any other Swiss institution. In the consciousness of the average Swiss, the people, the army and the country have been welded into one. The fact that every able-bodied Swiss is authorised and indeed obliged to keep his military equipment, including his rifle and, in these days of tension, even his ammunition, with him in his home, is both a symptom and a proof of this state of affairs.

One word more! Switzerland to-day, like every other free country, is facing one supreme problem, the problem of democratic efficiency. Can we adapt our political methods to the requirements of the economic and international peculiarities of our age? Can we so organise our institutions and so develop the spirit of our people that we may remain at once prosperous, secure and free?

I believe that the future of Swiss, as of every other democracy, depends on our reply to this question. It will be our highest endeavour to defend in Switzerland the ideals of a state which remains fully responsive to the will of its citizens and is yet strong enough to protect and generous enough not to enslave them. And while in our small Alpine republic we work towards this, we shall always look upon the great and free British Commonwealth of Nations with hope and good will and confident friendship.

(*The Listener.*)

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JOURNEE DES SUISSES DE L'ETRANGER 1939.

Le Secrétariat des Suisses à l'Etranger et l'Exposition Nationale invitent cordialement tous les Suisses à l'étranger et leurs amis à la

18e Journée des Suisses de l'Etranger,

qui aura lieu à l'Exposition Nationale de Zürich, les 12 et 13 août 1939.

Pour ne pas nuire aux fêtes du 1er août des colonies suisses et pour tenir compte du désire de certaines sociétés suisses d'Italie et de France de venir en voyages collectifs à Zurich à l'occasion des congés du 15 août (Assomption), nous avons renoncé à placer la Journée des Suisses de l'Etranger à la fin de juillet.

Cette manifestation aura lieu les *samedi et dimanche 12 et 13 août*. Des réunions moins importantes auront lieu le 14 août et, sur désir spécial, le 15 août.

La Suisse, Zurich, l'Exposition nationale, le Secrétariat des Suisses à l'Etranger, tous vous attendent avec la plus grande joie. Faites en sorte que votre colonie soit représentée le mieux possible à la manifestation solennelle organisée en l'honneur des Suisses à l'étranger.

PROGRAMME GENERAL

Samedi, 12 août
à la fin de l'après-midi :

au Bâtiment des Congès :

Ouverture de la Journée des Suisses de l'Etranger.

Rapports du Secrétariat des Suisses à l'Etranger.

Discussion de questions actuelles.

Soir : au Bâtiment des Congrès : Souper en commun ; soirée familière.

Dimanche, 13 août

Matin : Services religieux dans les diverses èglises de Zurich avec prédication d'ecclésiastiques suisses de l'étranger.

Manifestation officielle dans la Grande salle du Bâtiment de Congrès.

Réception par l'Exposition nationale. Visite de la " Haute Avenue " de l'Exposition nationale.

Midi : *Banquet officel* dans la salle des fêtes du Palais des attractions.

Soir : Représentation de la " Heimatschutzbühne " de Berne, au théâtre de l'exposition.

Lundi, 14 août

Matin : *Réception au Pavillon des Suisses à l'étranger.* — Visite de l'Exposition.

Soir : Souper en commun au " Landgasthof " suivi d'une soirée récréative.

Mardi, 15 août Sur demande spéciale, excursion en commun sur le lac ou dans les environs.

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FORTHCOMING EVENTS.

Monday, July 17th at 7 p.m. — Swiss Y.M.C.A. — Committee Meeting — at Westgate House, 28-29, Bedford Place, Russell Square, W.C.1.

Thursday, July 20th, at 7 p.m. — Swiss Y.M.C.A. — Lecture by Mr. W. Gysler, on " Lebenserkenntnisse des Königs Salomo " (Aus dem Buche des Predigers) to be followed by Quarterly members meeting, at Westgate House, 28-29, Bedford Place, Russell Square, W.C.1. *All Young Swiss Invited.*

Thursday, July 27th, at 7 p.m. — Swiss Y.M.C.A. — Lecture by Mr. W. Fischer, on " Higher Guidance," at Westgate House, 28-29, Bedford Place, Russell Square, W.C.1. *All Young Swiss Invited.*

Tuesday, August 1st from 8.30 p.m. — 2 a.m. — The Helvetia Club — Celebration of Swiss National Day — at 1 Gerrard Place, W.

Tuesday, August 1st — National Day Celebration at St. Pancras Hall.

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CATHEDRAL FESTIVAL PLAYS, BERNE
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INFORMATION Swiss Railways and State Travel Bureau, 11-B Lower Regent Street, London, S.W.1. (Whitehall 9851). Railway Continental Enquiry Offices, and Travel Agents.

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Dimanche 16 juillet 1939 :

11h. Culte. M. M. Pradervand.

7h. Culte. M. M. Pradervand.

8h. Répétition du Chœur mixte.

Retenez la date du dimanche 30 juillet. Cultes patriotiques à 11h. et 7h.

BAPTEME.

Le 9 juillet, Ann-Marie *Tovey*, fille de Leslie-Ernest Tovey et de Marie-Madeleine née Gerber.

A partir du 17 juillet, et jusqu'à nouvel avis, prière de s'adresser, pour tout ce qui concerne le ministère pastoral, à M. le past. U. Emery, Foyer Suisse, 15 Bedford Way, W.C.1 (Phone MUSeum 3100).

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Sonntag, den 16. Juli :

11 Uhr morgens, Gottesdienst
Pfr. E. Bommeli.

11 Uhr morgens, Sonntagschule
Hr. Fischer.

Während der Monate Juli und August fallen die Abendgottesdienste aus.

Anfragen wegen Religions — bezw. Konfirmanden Unterricht sind erbeten an Herrn Pfarrer E. Bommeli. Sprechstunden : Jeden Dienstag von 12-2 Uhr in der Kirche, Jeden Mittwoch von 5-6 Uhr im Foyer Suisse, 15, Bedford Way, W.C.1.

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