

Interview with National Councillor Philippe Pidoux : "Rethinking how our country works"

Autor(en): **Lenzin, René / Pidoux, Philippe**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **25 (1998)**

Heft 2

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907508>

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regions of Berne and Fribourg naturally turn to the Conference of the Governments of West Switzerland. They try to deal with transfrontier problems in the so-called "Arc jurassien". Treina also notes that differences of mentality and language as well as considerations of practical politics lead to a reluctance within the Espace Mittelland to become involved in over-bold projects.

Sovereignty not dismantled

For the moment hardly anybody speaks of transferring real authority to super-cantonal bodies, which in the last analysis would lead to the creation of new administrative units. According to Treina a new demarcation of Switzerland into a few regions for reasons of economic policy should be put forward because the present system of 26 different markets is expensive and does not provide easy answers to questions concerning location. But a weakening or dismantlement of cantonal sovereignty he considers to be completely unrealistic in present circumstances. It is a logical consequence that no references will be found to this in the documentation issued by the Espace. "Naturally this question will come up in the long term" says Sandra Maissen, "but we cannot decide today what happens in 50 years' time".

Resistance to ending cantonal independence would come not only from administrators and politicians faced with a considerable loss of power. Broad groups in the population would also be opposed. It is true that interest in cantonal elections and referendums is as a rule even less than in those at the federal and municipal level, but people will not allow any assault on federalism. When Philippe Pidoux, a Vaudois nation-

al councillor and former member of the cantonal government, last year called for the fusion of Vaud with Geneva, a cry of horror went up in both cantons (see interview). And in Schaffhausen acquisition of the canton's own computer tomography machine was elevated almost to the level of cantonal life and death, and the proposal only just dismissed.

EU regional policies

So for the moment we shall stick with loose associations within economic areas or regional government conferences (see box). At the same time the pressure will increase for intercantonal and transfrontier cooperation. This has a great deal to do with the regional policies of the European Union; both Sandra Maissen and Michael Treina emphasise the influence these had on the formation of Espace Mittelland. Encouraging the independence of regions some of which have often grown up, over the centuries, amounts to a sort of "Swissification" of the EU, yet it puts Swiss federalism in question. For most cantons are too small to play in the concert of a Europe of the regions.

In sum: anyone today who conjures up the prospect of an end to the cantons misjudges the real situation. But anyone who postulates a Switzerland with 26 cantons in all eternity will have to rethink things in the longer term. An East Swiss member of the Council of States whispers in private: "I am persuaded that we shall have to create a canton of East Switzerland. But because the time is not yet ripe for such a notion, it would be counterproductive to put it to the public." His parliamentary colleague Pidoux will confirm that... ■

Regional government conferences

Inner-Swiss Government Conference: Lucerne, Upper and Lower Unterwalden, Schwyz, Uri, Zug

Regional Conference of the Governments of northwest Switzerland: Aargau, Basle City, Basle Rural, Berne, Soleure

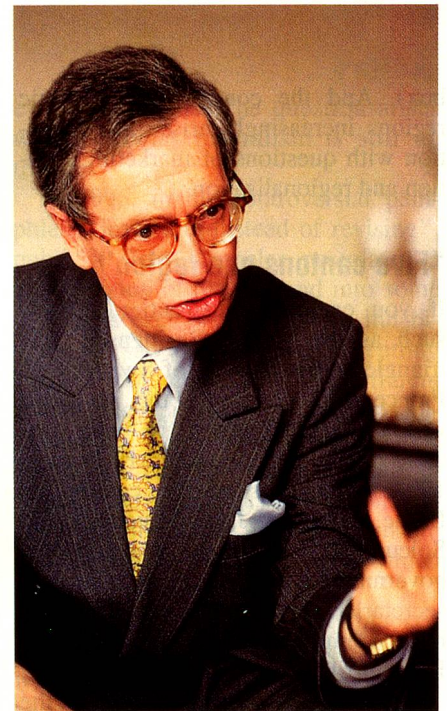
Conference of the Cantonal Governments of east Switzerland: Appenzell Inner Rhodes, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, Glarus, Grisons, Schaffhausen, St Gall, Thurgau

Conference of the Cantons of west Switzerland: Berne, Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, Valais, Vaud

Conference of mountain canton governments: Glarus, Grisons, Lower and Upper Nidwalden, Ticino, Uri, Valais

Interview with National Councillor

"Rethinking how



Philippe Pidoux:
"Our 26 lilliputian states are
obsolete in the world of today."
(Photos: Michael Stahl)

Mr Pidoux, you recently proposed fusion of the cantons of Vaud and Geneva. Is this the idea of a technocrat or a dreamer?

Dreaming is a condition of action. Do we want to hand on a Switzerland paralyzed in its partitions and complexities? Our generation received a privileged country from those responsible for the mobilisation. We have taken on debts beyond all reason and we are leaving it to our children to repay them. When my children ask me what my generation has done, I want to be able to answer that I tried to serve our people by suggesting a different way of organising the country.

In daily life cantonal frontiers are losing a great deal of their importance. Nonetheless most people are opposed to your idea. How do you explain this contradiction?

Our suggestion has had a certain success in what I call civil society. But all those who have power now want to avoid losing it, and the administrative machine too is afraid of change. That is

Philippe Pidoux

Our country works"

why my idea has run into the resistance of the «apparatchiks».

Do you believe that your suggestion would attract a majority in a popular vote?

When opinion polls were held in June 1997 a majority of the inhabitants of the cantons of Geneva and Vaud said they favoured the idea of fusion of the two cantons. I believe that people in this part of the country are aware of a certain feeling of common identity built up over the years. Talking to foreigners you find that they believe that there is a single city, a megalopolis extending from Geneva to Montreux. It is a green city, an ecological city and a cultivated city, a city where women are safe to walk in the streets and children are well educated.

There are grounds for thinking that you were not re-elected to your canton's council of state because you had supported too radical a policy in the hospital field. That did not stop you launching an even more radical idea...

Even if we have to regulate for the short term, we are able to see farther ahead. It is written that we will end up by reaching an agreement with the European Union. We will create a region with our neighbours, and I am afraid that – if we remain weak as we now are – it will be built around Lyon; with a prefecture in Geneva and a sub-prefecture in Lausanne. With a million inhabitants, the Vaud-Genève region is Switzerland's biggest after Zurich. I want to strengthen it so that it will be able to take its own decisions about its future.

The two cantons of Geneva and Vaud are rich, but where debt is concerned they are also at the bottom of the class in Switzerland. Financially their policies are irresponsible. We must take advantage of this weakness to change the rules and rethink the structures.

Various intercantonal cooperation structures are already in existence, such as the "Conseil du Léman" ("Léman council"), the conference of governments of French-speaking Switzerland and "Espace Mittelland". Why should a new "Canton Léman" be created?

Because I have come up through the government machine, and I see these institutions working. There is so much resistance to any attempt to do something useful. Switzerland is a complicated country. You have the communal level, the cantonal level and the federal level. It is possible to block things at all three levels. And with all the organisations which you have mentioned a fourth level is being created, and with it a fourth possibility of blocking action. Take the example of the collaboration between the two university hospitals in Geneva and Lausanne. This minor but real link is already opposed by a referendum in Geneva. Hence my proposal that the two cantons should merge so that the people can exercise their rights in the context of a new canton.

Is your proposal made to measure for the specific situation in the lake of Geneva area, or could it serve as a model for other regions of Switzerland too?

Merger of Switzerland's two big French-speaking cantons is a necessary part of the country's federalist renewal taken as a whole. Central Switzerland is

Philippe Pidoux

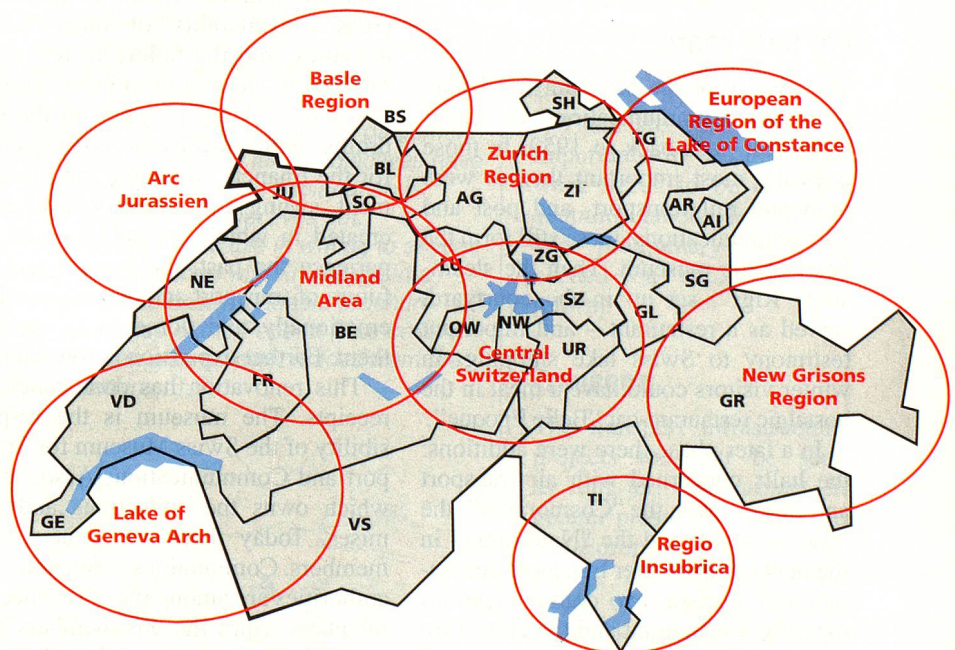


Born 1943 at Lausanne, Philippe Pidoux was a member of Vaud council of state from 1986 to 1993. As director of public health he worked energetically to rationalise the health sector and in particular set up a project to merge the university hospitals of Geneva and Lausanne, which is currently waiting for a political decision. In 1993 Philippe Pidoux had to leave the Vaud council of state after failing to be re-elected. He has been a member of the radical group in the National Council since 1983.

faced with the same problems as we are. Eastern Switzerland is cooperating increasingly. In my opinion 26 lilliputian states corresponded to the needs of the inhabitants up until the Second World War. But these 26 dwarf states are obsolete in the world of today.

Interview: René Lenzin

Switzerland of economic areas



BURI GRAFIK (Source: Espace Mittelland/Treina)