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Two souls in Bernese Jura

Bern or Jura? On 18 June, after centuries of division, Moutier voted to switch canton. Just. Votes were also held in two small Bernese-Jura villages on 17 September.

SIMON THÖNEN

For the small town of Moutier, the Sunday vote on 18 June was a day of decision – and great emotions. Even in the morning, hours before the much-awaited result of the local referendum on switching cantons was announced, the pro-Jura supporters with their red and white flags dominated the scene in the small industrial town. The jubilation was huge when it transpired that Moutier wants to switch canton, from Bern to Jura. “Bravo Moutier!”, called out a separatist in the crowd. “We did it!” A town party was held afterwards with a lot of beer, music and fireworks until late in the night.

Yet the result was tight, with 51.7 percent voting yes, the gap amounting to just 137 votes. So on this day of decision, the small town with 7,700 people remained divided. Those in favour of Bern, who had gathered in a hall on the edge of the town, also celebrated – albeit for a short time only. For a moment they mistakenly thought that victory was theirs. Then many broke into tears. And the disappointment of those who had lost did give pro-Jura Mayor of Moutier Marcel Winistoerfer (CVP) “some cause for concern”, he admitted, despite his delight about the outcome of the referendum. The town authorities now face a huge challenge to convince those who rejected a Jura future about its advantages.

In Moutier, the die has been cast. There was a fierce dispute in previous decades because the town on the border between north and south Jura was divided. Elsewhere, the situation is clearer. For the most part Bernese Jura wants to remain with the canton of Bern, as it transpired in a regional referendum in 2013. And only two other

municipalities in Bernese Jura voted on the canton switch after Moutier – on 17 September (after our copy deadline). The centre of Belprahon is a beautiful former farming village on the southern hillside of Mont Raimeux – and on the outskirts of Moutier with many detached houses. In this village of 300 residents, people were divided about the question of Bern or Jura – even within families. Commune mayor Michel Leuenberger was pro-Bern, while his brother Philippe was hoping for a vote in favour of Jura, “because Jura is more familiar, that’s where the best festivals and parties are”. Yet in contrast to before, both confirm that there are no wars within families because of the Jura question.

Sorvilier, the second village that voted on 17 September, does not border onto Moutier. A vote was held here because the majority of the municipal council is pro-Jura – but the mayor is pro-Bern. Just like many villagers, François Romy, president of the neutral civic community, has two souls in his chest. “In my heart, I am Jurassian,” he says. “But I am also a vociferous defender of bilingualism” – meaning the coexistence of French and German speakers in the canton of Bern.

From an economic perspective, however, the canton of Jura is not a growth driver. It regularly comes last in terms of competitiveness, and with regard to financial equalisation for the cantons it is one of the largest recipient cantons per capita. The expectations became much more ambitious upon the establishment of the canton, says Müller. But the starting situation as a peripheral region relatively far from the economic hubs was difficult from the outset. The newly completed Transjurane motorway does raise hopes of some economic impetus for the structurally weak region. However, says Sean Müller, a motorway can have the opposite effect that more people commute to work outside the canton.

Just like most similar cases, and generally speaking in politics, the Jura conflict was never just about strong rational arguments, there was always a lot of emotion. Even the somewhat anachronistic dispute today about the “right” cantonal affiliation hovers somewhere between a right to self-determination, identity issues and ethno-nationalism. And even if the canton of Jura will probably never stretch down as far as Lake Biel, and the conflict will someday be confined to history, the “Rauracienne”, the official anthem of the canton of Jura, will probably still say:

“From Lake Biel to the gates of France / Hope ripens in the darkness of the towns / From our hearts sounds a song of deliverance / Our flag waved on the mountains / You, who care about the fate of the fatherland / Break the chains of an unjust destiny!”

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