

# The Landsgemeinde : the original form of democracy in Switzerland

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## THE LANDSGEMEINDE

### THE ORIGINAL FORM OF DEMOCRACY IN SWITZERLAND

If we enquire into the origins of modern democracy, we shall find that it springs from three roots. Its name points back to ancient Greece, where the assembly of free men was already a political institution. The chief impetus to the onward sweep of the democracy of modern times came from the West in the declaration of the Rights of Man made by the United States of North America, which was, in its turn, adopted by the French Revolution, in the Age of Enlightenment, as the basis of its reconstruction of human society. While these democratic movements are familiar all the world over, too little is still known of the modern form of the sovereignty of the people which has descended direct from the Middle Ages in the "Landsgemeinden" (folk-moots) of Alpine Switzerland. There is proof that the "Landsgemeinde" goes back to the year of Magna Carta, and in five of the twenty-five cantons it has remained a living institution down to the present day. Thus we have here a primeval form of democracy, with a tradition older than that of most dynasties in the world, for there are Landsgemeinden where the men assemble every spring at the very place where their forefathers, the contemporaries of the movement of liberation symbolized in the figure of William Tell, gathered twenty generations back.

Anyone who imagines the Landsgemeinde as some moth-eaten and artificial resuscitation of an old political custom will soon be undeceived if he visits, for instance, the Landsgemeinde of Glarus. For the canton of Glarus, consisting mainly of a very narrow valley, with mountains towering up to nine thousand feet above the villages, is one of the most highly industrialised regions of Europe. It was here, at the Landsgemeinde of 1864, that the first laws in Europe were passed for the protection of the workers. There is no museum atmosphere about the Landsgemeinde. A living community, gathered together as of old, shapes its own political fate in self-imposed order.

The assembly takes place in the loveliest of seasons—the spring. Through the fresh green of the spring fields, the keen-eyed factory workers and the slow, deliberate farmers, many still wearing the full beard of their ancestors, stream in from every part of the canton. They assemble in the "ring," a ring-shaped stage with benches in front for the elders of the six thousand citizens.

Suddenly there is a silence. To the sound of music the tramp of approaching soldiers is heard. The Government is coming. All heads are bared, for the people respect their self-elected rulers. No herald moves more proudly than the Sergeant-at-Arms in his flowing red and white mantle. He carries the sword of State on which the

"Landammann" (the president of the cantonal government) leans during the proceedings. Then the Landammann himself approaches, his deputy, the "Landesstatthalter," at his side. Then come, in solemn procession, the five cantonal councillors, the members of the court of law, of the cantonal parliament and the high officials of state.

The Landammann takes up his stand on the platform in the middle of the ring. At his feet, as it were in the heart of the people, a few hundred schoolboys have gathered for their first lesson in citizenship in this, the finest school of citizenship in the world. The Landammann opens proceedings with a speech in which he first recounts what has been happening in the world at large, then the history of the year in the Swiss Confederation as a whole, and finally comes to speak of the Landsgemeinde. In order to recall to the assembled citizens the gravity of their responsibility in legislation and elections, the oath is taken by the Landammann and the people. It is a moving moment when the many thousand hands are raised to take the solemn oath of loyalty to God, man and the assembly, while the oath thunders up from the hearts and lips of the men. Here, at any rate, there is no room for arid paper bureaucracy, but only a living community, which has for centuries maintained itself, and its respect for the individual citizen, in the teeth of all absolutisms and dictatorships.

In the course of the assembly, all elections and votes are decided by show of hands. Where there is a clear majority, the Landammann pronounces the result. In cases of doubt he calls in the advice of the cantonal councillors. In smaller Landsgemeinden actual counts are taken in hotly disputed questions, the two sides marching up in ranks of four. This may hold up business for half an hour or so, but it guarantees the accuracy of the result, if not the freedom of secret voting. The complete freedom of speech accorded to all at the Landsgemeinde may produce very dramatic moments. It often happens that the sovereign people, under the spell of some speaker's eloquence, reverses the decision taken at the prior discussion in the cantonal council. Today the competence of the Landsgemeinde is confined to the election of the cantonal authorities and certain cantonal officials, to amendments of the constitution, annual legislation and the budget. But until the end of the eighteenth century, when foreign policy was not yet a Federal concern, it was the Landsgemeinde which was the final authority for the conclusion of alliances with the great Powers of Europe. Thus it was the Landsgemeinde which had to decide whether a mercenary pact was to be concluded or not with that all-powerful monarch, Louis XIV. Every man had the right to object or propose, and if, in the Confederation of today, the citizen not only sends his representative to parliament, but must himself pronounce judgment on the most important legislative proposals, if he still jealously guards his right of initiative

and referendum, that goes back to the old spirit of the Landsgemeinde.

Each of the five Landsgemeinden has its own special character. The most picturesque is the Obwalden assembly on the castle hill above Sarnen. The most heated is that of Nidwalden. In Glarus, the ring and the magnificent mountain background are most impressive. In Appenzell, where men love a good song and a good joke, we might almost call proceedings jolliest, while in Appenzell Outer Rhodes they are most solemn. In this canton an old Germanic folk-custom has remained alive. According to the old principle that it is the armed man who is the free man, the citizens appear at the assembly armed with dagger or bayonet, and the unarmed intruder is soon shouted into the outer pale of the onlookers. Thus weapons of war have here taken on a symbolic meaning, and it would be well for the world if all weapons could be thus ennobled by the union of might and right.

That is the thought that comes into my mind when I look at my Landsgemeinde dagger, on which some old armourer has engraved the Roman motto "suum cuique." For our fighting ancestors this may have been a token of defiance, but in our day it has become the watchword of justice. It is a saying which unites Christianity and democracy. The Christian respect of the person and the foundation of human laws on the divine commandments find expression in the solemnity with which Catholic Unterwalden intones the "Veni creator spiritus" while Protestant Appenzell Outer Rhodes is opening its Landsgemeinde with a hymn to God. This deep faith in their community under the fatherhood of God is not only the root, it is also a guarantee of all democracy, and without this political form of the community, no freedom, no justice and no lasting peace can be imagined or achieved among men and nations.

## SWITZERLAND AND THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING NATIONS

When the Pilgrim Fathers set out for the New World in the seventeenth century, they took with them the Geneva Bible; the Mayflower Pact of 1620 is imbued with the spirit of Calvinism. The University of Harvard was modelled on Calvin's Academy in Geneva. Similarly, the Declaration of Faith promulgated in Geneva in 1537 inspired not only the National League and Covenant for the defence of religion drawn up by the Scots in 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, but also the covenants of the New England pioneers.

When President Wilson chose Geneva as the seat of the League of Nations in 1919, his decision was doubtless influenced by the remembrance of these historical connections and affinities.

In the nineteenth century, the influence of the United States was, in its turn, felt by Switzer-

land. When, in 1848, the question of a new constitution was raised, Swiss legislators adopted the American bicameral system, the most representative both of the nation as a whole and the Cantons individually. The Swiss Federal Assembly corresponds to the Washington Congress, the National Council to the House of Representatives and the States Council to the Senate. The introduction of this system has brought real and lasting benefits to Switzerland.

In the course of history, England has often taken a political interest in Switzerland and, from Elizabeth to Cromwell, from Castlereagh to Palmerstone, she has in each case intervened or lent her support to help and safeguard the smaller nation's independence. At the time of the War of the Sonderbund, in 1847, when France and Austria wished to bring their armies to bear on Switzerland in a matter of domestic policy, England opposed the attempts of the two great powers.

History also reveals a great number of associations between the English and the Swiss. It is a little known fact, for instance, that Othon de Grandson, a Swiss knight and poet at the court of the Dukes of Savoy, also served under Edward III. Chaucer called him "the flower of French poets" and translated three of his poems into English. Peter II, Duke of Savoy, who was related by marriage to Henri III, spent several years at the English court and later, when he had extended his dominion over a large part of Switzerland, he called upon English military architects to build strongholds and fortresses throughout his newly conquered domains.

(To be continued.)

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