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# The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

## The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

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## HOW SWITZERLAND IS GOVERNED

by

REGINALD LANGFORD

There is actually no such thing as a "Swiss type". There are citizens of Berne, Zurich, Basle, Geneva, St. Gall, Lugano and the other towns; and they are all different.

There are people who inhabit the villages and small communities of the twenty-five different cantons. There are scattered families living up on the mountain-sides. But they are not just Swiss.

They are first and foremost natives of the community to which their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers for generations past belonged, and it is sheer chance that these communities happened to be situated within the confines of the Swiss Confederation.

So they remain different. If a citizen of Lausanne wants to become a citizen of Zurich, or vice versa, he has to take out his papers just like any other common or garden foreigner.

There are over 3,000 such communities in Switzerland, and they are run like exclusive clubs.

The advantage of membership lies in the community's guarantee that it will welcome its members back into the fold at any time and under any circumstances.

The aged and infirm, the down-and-out, the incurable imbecile — all have a claim for support on the treasury of the place where their forefathers came from. They themselves may never have returned to the old spot, which is duly marked in their identity papers down through the generations, but back they can go — and back they are sometimes sent when destitute, or when they have proved so morally undesirable that their community of residence will have nothing more to do with them.

Yes, even a Swiss can be expelled from, and refused admission to, any part of Switzerland except his home canton! It is therefore important — like choosing one's parents — to belong to a rich and generous community.

"The most important Swiss identity paper is — the certificate issued by the local authorities confirming that the holder's family comes from that town, village or rural community."

Not that this has any effect on individual character. But it is somehow a basic, fundamental factor in the political and social make-up of the State.

The most important Swiss identity paper is not the passport, nor even the birth certificate — after all, one can be born anywhere — but the so-called "Heimatschein", the certificate issued by the local authorities confirming that the holder's family comes from that town, village, or rural community.

The fact is that the political structure of the Swiss Confederation is a synthesis. Each family is a cell of the State and, as we have seen, has its own original home in a certain community, even though the family itself may have lived elsewhere for generations.

In the same way, the separate communities retain their individuality *vis-à-vis* the canton; and the cantons jealously guard their rights and privileges *vis-à-vis* the Confederation.

Some cantons, in fact, still officially style themselves republics!

To add to all this, there are four different languages — German (or rather Swiss-German), French, Italian and Romansch.

"The country is not governed at all — it is merely administered."

### CITY SWISS CLUB

#### ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

on Tuesday, 25th April, 1961, at 6.30 for 7 p.m. at Dorchester Hotel (Orchid Room), W.1.

#### Agenda :

- |                          |                     |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Minutes of last meeting. | Elections.          |
| Resignations.            | Auditor's Report.   |
| President's Report.      | Admissions.         |
| Treasurer's Report.      | Any other business. |

Members wishing to be present should send their slip to the Manager of Dorchester Hotel, W.1, to reach him not later than Monday, 24th April, 1961.

THE COMMITTEE.

And this means four different races, which again means four completely different types of people with distinct mentalities and cultures.

And even if we were to take the German-speaking Swiss alone, we should still find wide differences between, say, the Balois and the Zurichois, the Central Swiss type (from Lucerne or Schwyz) and the St. Galler.

Politically speaking, therefore, Switzerland might be regarded as a difficult country to "run". The people are not homogeneous in language, character, or culture like the French, the Germans, the Italians or the English.

Nor are they even a blend or fusion of races like the population of the United States. On the contrary, despite generations of federalism and intermarriage, the language frontiers and cultural borders are just as clearly defined as ever.

Yet there are no minorities. Each of the racial and lingual elements is so proud of its culture and independence within the Confederation that some of the cantons still insist on officially calling themselves republics.

The Constitution recognises all four national languages. The omission of Romansch from the inscriptions when a new set of banknotes was issued some years ago was the subject of much criticism.

A simultaneous translation system has to be used to expedite debates in Parliament.

The Government of Switzerland might be defined as a permanent coalition, though in reality the country is not governed at all; it is merely administered.

"The Federal Council functions more like the board of directors of a business concern than a Cabinet."

The supreme administrative body is the Federal Council, a kind of Cabinet consisting of seven members elected, virtually, for life. Each is the chief of one of the departments or ministries — Finance, Foreign Affairs, Interior, National Economy, Military (Defence), Justice, Transport and Communications.

One of the present seven retired at the end of last years after celebrating his 25 years jubilee as a Federal Councillor. He was "still going strong", but it is good form to resign voluntarily though reluctantly before senile decay sets in.

In recent times only two have been forced out of office by public opinion: the first during World War II, because he was alleged to have been too weak in standing up to Nazi arrogance; the second, a few years ago, because — very significantly — a more forceful personality was felt to be needed at the head of the postwar Ministry of Defence.

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The Federal Council functions more like the board of directors of a business concern than a Cabinet. Its members represent the major political parties, and their President or Chairman (for there is no such person as "the President of Switzerland") is elected by Parliament for one year.

He is then, as a matter of routine, succeeded by his Vice-president, who probably belongs to another party, whereupon he himself goes back to the end of the line and waits till his number comes up again in seven years' time.

When it does, he merely becomes *primus inter pares* once more, taking the chair at Council meetings and representing the nation on State occasions. Otherwise he has no additional powers, and even goes on running his Department or Ministry during his presidency.

"Most Swiss have to make an effort to recall the name of their current President."

This ingeniously simple system sensibly eliminates all party ballyhoo at the peak of the political pyramid. The result of the annual presidential election is a foregone conclusion and thus devoid of popular interest.

(To be continued.)

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