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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

by Gottfried Keller

Do the members of the Swiss Government, the Federal Councillors, live in an ivory tower in Berne? Are they guarded and secluded, driven about in limousines by liveried chauffeurs, beyond the law and out of touch with the people, moving only in a higher sphere and wrapped in the cotton-wool of luxury, unseen and unapproachable, remote as well as aloof? According to one who has retired not so long ago and has just been interviewed on TV, the Hon. Nello Celio, that is not the case at all.

To begin with, a newly-elected Federal Councillor, on joining the august circle for the first time, is told that according to custom, the Seven address one another by their christian names and call each other "Du". Most of them drive their own cars to their offices, or they may come by tram, or if they live near the Federal Palace, on foot. For these journeys to and from work, they have no official cars, even though they do have the privilege of a reserved parking space. Like everyone else our Federal Councillors pay income tax. The atmosphere in their official meetings is usually very friendly, even though it can

and does happen that opinions on any given subject may differ widely. Debates on particular subjects may be hard and energetic as far as the matter is concerned, but never personal. If opinions are widely split, usually the subject-matter is discussed until a generally agreed compromise solution is reached. Actual voting inside the Federal Council is rare. The Federal Council – always according to Mr Celio – is very conscious of the power of the mass media, particularly the printed word. Formerly the government used to meet regularly twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday. But since the publication of the official communiqué after these meetings sometimes created difficulties for the press by being issued too late for the weekend editions, nowadays the "Seven Wise Men" hold their meetings on a Wednesday. That does indeed constitute a compliment to the fourth estate in the land.

Had he, Mr Celio was asked, made any mistakes during his seven-year term of office, which on looking back with the wisdom of hindsight, he wished he had not made? "Of course", he replied,

"everybody makes mistakes, Federal Councillors included. What I really regret now is that I did not revalue (upwards) the Swiss franc by 10 to 15 per cent in 1969; My experts at the time advised on a 'small' revaluation of about three to five per cent, whereas I thought 10 – 15 per cent would have been right. In the end nothing was done. This I now regret, because we would not be in the position in which we are now, had we done that." About his many international contacts while being Minister of Finances, Mr Celio was naturally very diplomatic and discreet. Both Mr Giscard d'Estaing, now President of the French Republic, and Mr Helmut Schmitt, now Chancellor of Germany, were termed "highly intelligent and competent" while the Ticinese in Mr Celio had, naturally, a special affinity to and rapport with members of the Italian Government. The rest of the interview was about his hobbies: pottering with motor car engines and cooking risotto. Mr Celio's great charm, wit and human warmth even broke through the television screen: no wonder he was, and still is, very popular wherever his fatherly smile is seen.



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