

The Landsgemeinden : Swiss politics or pageantry?

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1983)**

Heft 1800

PDF erstellt am: **21.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686547>

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The annual open-air assembly in Appenzell-Innerrhoden

The Landsgemeinden – Swiss politics or pageantry?

SPRING is here again – and with it, Switzerland's *Landsgemeinden*.

Mention Swiss democracy, and the *Landsgemeinden* is a word that invariably comes to mind. For these are the centuries-old open-air gatherings of voters where cantonal affairs and elections are still decided the old-fashioned way by a simple show of hands.

Switzerland's international reputation as one of the world's oldest and most stable democracies finds no clearer expression than in these traditional assemblies which survive today in only five of the nation's 26 cantons and half cantons – Glarus, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Appenzell-Innerrhoden and Appenzell-Ausserrhoden.

The *Landsgemeinde* is the highlight of the political year in each of these rural regions. All but one of the annual assemblies are held on the last Sunday of April; the Glarus gathering takes place on the first Sunday in May.

All these are small cantons where pop-

ulations range from only 13,000 to 48,000. The *Landsgemeinde* is still a genuine public platform and the most practical procedure for settling matters of cantonal concern.

Every voter has the right to address the assembly, be he blacksmith or banker, postman or professor. Often, a simple citizen with no experience of public speaking will express his opinion in unpolished, awkward phrases.

The agenda may cover such wide-ranging issues as government salaries, dog licences, public building projects and women's suffrage (the womenfolk of both the Appenzells are still not allowed to vote in cantonal affairs, although they do have full political rights at national level).

Every year the *Landsgemeinden* also attract crowds of spectators, not only from throughout Switzerland itself but from abroad as well.

Foreign diplomats and dignitaries are often among the most interested onlookers,

and an almost unnoticed observer last year was none other than former US Secretary of State, Dr Henry Kissinger.

I remember in the 1970s meeting members of a visiting British parliamentary delegation whose tour here included attendance at the Nidwalden *Landsgemeinde*. They were, in their own words, "overawed at the sight of thousands of Swiss standing rock solid for hours practising direct democracy."

But these annual open-air assemblies, while widely praised as shining examples of Swiss democracy in action, have also come in for mounting criticism over recent years.

The *Landsgemeinden*, some critics point out, contradict the principle of the citizen's right to a secret vote. Others believe that the assemblies are becoming increasingly unworkable and unwieldy, and that government in this ancient form has now outlived its usefulness.

Yet another view is that the *Landsgemeinden* have become too much of

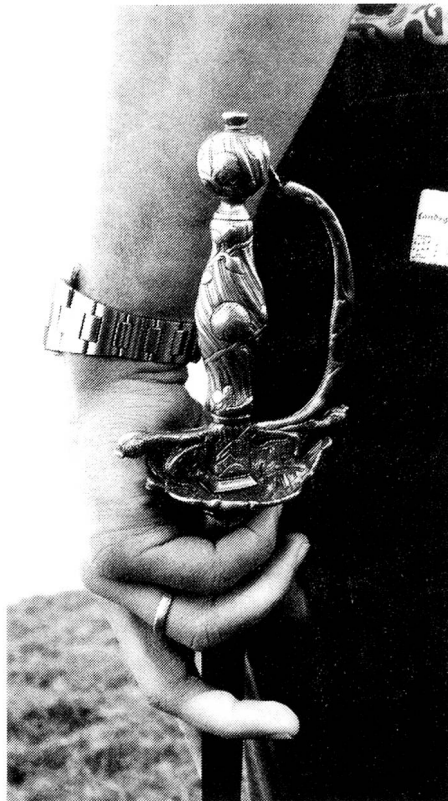
a folksy tourist attraction and bear more resemblance to pageantry rather than to politics.

Moves have even been introduced in recent years – unsuccessfully – to abolish the *Landsgemeinde* tradition. One such attempt, in Obwalden, attracted particular public interest.

While forthright speech is expected at the gatherings, some of the comments made at one particular meeting were felt to have gone far too far. Hard words and even insults were traded between opposing factions; one candidate for an official post was described publicly as a “semi-idiot” and it was alleged that another could not spell properly.

Feelings were upset, especially as the proceedings had been broadcast live by Swiss radio and had been heard in thousands of homes across the nation.

One of the insulted candidates subsequently gathered enough support for a referendum on abolishing the annual assembly. But the move was defeated, and the Obwalden and other *Landsgemeinden* continue to survive as centuries-spanning Swiss democracy in its most direct form.



In Appenzell-Ausserrhoden, the sword symbolises the citizen's right to vote

THE Swiss are still the world's thriftiest savers, according to statistics just published by the Geneva-based International Saving Banks Institute.

The Swiss have headed the table for the past five years. Second place is currently held by the Japanese, with the Belgians in third place.

According to the dollar-denomination listing, the average Swiss currently has no less than \$14,122 stacked away in bank savings. Japan is far behind with a figure of \$8,947.

Others in the top 10 are Belgium \$8,017; West Germany \$7,378; Austria \$5,939; United States \$5,407; Norway \$5,340; Sweden \$4,922; France \$4,577; and Singapore \$4,314.

The choice of savings varies greatly from country to country, reports the Institute, with savings banks facing strong competition from insurance, stocks and shares and other securities.

But here in Switzerland the share of traditional bank savings in total savings still remains at more than 50 per cent, with the proportion ranging from a third to a half in almost all other industrialised nations.

SWISS SOCCER

Football League tables up to and including March 4

'A' Division							'B' Division								
Pl	W	D	L	Gls	Pts		Pl	W	D	L	Gls	Pts			
Grasshoppers	16	13	1	2	43	13	27	Ch-de-Fonds	15	13	1	1	46	7	27
Servette	16	13	1	2	36	9	27	Biel	15	10	2	3	36	19	22
Zürich	16	9	3	4	31	21	21	Chiasso	16	9	4	3	34	16	22
Xamax	15	9	2	4	33	22	20	Lugano	16	9	3	4	40	26	21
Lucerne	16	8	3	5	35	29	19	Chênois	15	8	4	3	30	21	20
Young Boys Berne	16	7	5	4	20	19	19	Laufen	15	7	6	2	24	16	20
Sion	16	6	6	4	24	17	18	Nordstern	16	6	6	4	26	21	18
Lausanne	16	7	3	6	27	20	17	Fribourg	16	5	7	4	26	23	17
St. Gallen	15	7	2	6	27	17	16	Mendrisio	15	5	4	6	23	30	14
Basle	16	7	2	7	27	22	16	Grenchen	15	3	7	5	14	19	13
Vevey	16	7	2	7	28	29	16	Monthey	16	4	5	7	27	27	13
Wettingen	16	5	4	7	27	28	14	Locarno	16	4	4	8	18	32	12
Bellinzona	16	3	2	11	15	46	8	Berne	15	3	3	9	17	32	9
Aarau	16	2	2	12	11	34	6	Ibach	16	3	3	10	17	39	9
Bulle	16	1	4	11	12	44	6	Baden	16	1	6	9	12	34	8
Winterthur	16	0	4	12	11	37	4	Rüti	15	1	1	13	17	45	3