

The “Swiss Ideal of democracy” deserves great respect

Modern, not outdated

by Dr Sabine Vuilleumier-Koch*

During the parliamentary recess, the Parliament Building in Bern opens its doors to the public. Those interested are invited to visit the historic and magnificent rooms where Swiss politicians work and make decisions that generally have far-reaching consequences for the country and its people. It is certainly not the building itself that is to blame when the “Swiss ideal” is increasingly called into question by these politicians – for example, regarding neutrality and the commitment to peace of past generations.

During a guided tour of the Parliament building, comparisons inevitably spring to mind between the historical and cultural foundations of Switzerland on display here and current politics – the discrepancy is considerable. A return to our roots is necessary if Switzerland is not to dissolve like a sugar cube in the floodwaters of the EU or be drawn into the wars of third countries.

A guided tour in broad Bernese German, led by a spontaneous and knowledgeable young lady, reinforces the certainty that the fundamental principles of Switzerland’s political culture remain relevant today and are by no means outdated. She brings Switzerland’s history to life for visitors in a way that touches both the mind and the heart. At every turn, the architecture – with its diverse range of materials, stone and bronze statues, and stained-glass windows and murals in various styles – brings to life for visitors striking personalities, culture, the foundations of politics and historical events. According to the Parliament’s website, the “Swiss democratic ideal” has never before, and will never again, been embodied in a building in such a way, both materially and artistically, as in the Parliament Building.¹ The architect’s intention was to construct the building as a “national monument and symbol of the whole of Switzerland”.

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The Parliament Building on Bundesplatz in Bern. (Picture sv)

“We want to be free ...”

The Domed Hall forms the original entrance area of the Parliament Building. Visitors are greeted by the “Three Confederates”: Walter Fürst of Uri, Werner Stauffacher of Schwyz and Arnold von Melchtal of Unterwalden are said to have been the founders of the Swiss Confederation in 1291. The people had had enough of Habsburg rule, which is why the three men rose up and swore an oath on the Rütli above Lake Lucerne:

“We will be one nation of brothers, in no adversity or danger shall we be divided. We will be free, as the fathers were, rather to die than to live in bondage. Let us trust in the Most High God and not be afraid of the power of men.”

This brings to mind the Switzerland–EU package of agreements: the Swiss Confederates



In the Domed Hall, the “Three Confederates” take centre stage. (Picture parlament.ch)

wanted to be free from domination – and today? The Federal Council is prepared to relinquish Switzerland's legislative sovereignty in favour of a faltering, increasingly authoritarian EU. This intention is all too clear, for example, in the Federal Council's explanatory notes on this package of agreements:

"In principle, these legal acts will be applied directly by Switzerland without the need to transpose them into national law."² What is being set out here is nothing less than the circumvention of Parliament and of the population in the legislative process. A development that was unthinkable until recently.

Angel of Peace with an Olive Branch

In the National Council chamber, the spacious chairs for the 200 parliamentarians are arranged in a semicircle. Directly in the line of sight of the representatives of the legislature is a painting, some eleven metres wide and five metres high on the wall behind the Speaker's podium. The painting is entitled "The Cradle of the Swiss Confederation", as it depicts the Rütli – the site where the Swiss Confederation was founded in 1291 – alongside Lake Uri, a part of Lake Lucerne, the town of Schwyz and the Kleiner and Grosser Mythen mountains. A few white clouds hang over the lake. If one's attention is drawn to them, one can make out an angel in one of the clouds, holding a golden olive branch.

A symbolic image: the painter, the Swiss figure and landscape artist *Charles Giron* (1850–1914), had depicted the Angel of Peace holding the golden olive branch as a symbol of the settlement of a dispute between the two original cantons of Uri and Schwyz. Both cantons had claimed the site of the founding of the Swiss Confederation in 1291 as their own but later reconciled.³ – A quality of conflict resolution that must also be upheld in the debates of the Chambers.

At their swearing-in ceremony, the newly elected Federal Councillors stand before the semicircle of seats in the National Council and thus,



(Picture sv)

in a figurative sense, on the Rütli meadow – in accordance with the vision of the architect *Hans Wilhelm Auer* (1847–1906). In this way, they are to re-enact the Rütli Oath through their own oath – precisely as Confederates.

This spatial and visual interweaving of history and the present highlights the obligation to make decisions in the interests of their own country, Switzerland, and not in the interests of supranational organisations or third countries. Whilst the Confederates were once prepared to fight for self-determination and sovereignty, today a lack of resolve and dependence on "higher" authorities such as the EU and NATO threaten to supplant this original strength.

The pursuit of non-violent conflict resolution is also reflected in the peace-related aims of the popular initiative "Safeguarding Swiss Neutrality". By voting "Yes" on 27 September, voters can support this initiative. Switzerland's long-standing neutrality is to be enshrined in a separate article of the Federal Constitution.⁴

The people decide

Impressive paintings also dominate the Council of States chamber, the meeting place of the cantonal representatives: through painted arcades on the back wall of the chamber, one can see a Nidwalden Landsgemeinde, one of the models for Swiss parliamentary work. This fresco was created by *Albert Welti* and his painter friend *Wilhelm Balmer*.

If one listens to what people are saying, the conviction that the people decide is slowly but surely fading – "those up there in Bern do as they please anyway!" Massive propaganda by the authorities in the run-up to referendums, or the failure to implement popular decisions, is increasingly raising doubts about the functioning of direct democracy.

The loss of trust is considerable. The Federal Administration and parliamentarians must halt this trend and once again align themselves with the will of the people. This must be possible.

Virtues of the State

No less impressive than the other paintings are the ceiling murals in the lobby, a wide, semi-circular corridor behind the National Council Chamber offering views of the city and the Bernese Alps. This is where parliamentarians "stroll" during the session, hold discussions, give interviews to journalists and, according to the guide, are "lob-

bied” by lobbyists right up until shortly before the votes in the chamber. Above their heads, the principles of political action are depicted in pictures. They are referred to as the “virtues of the state”, as the guide explains: truth, respect for the law, patriotism, peace, mercy and justice.

An entire treatise could be written on each of these concepts, yet whose understanding of their significance is not immediately apparent if direct democracy is to be put into practice?

Pride in our country

The participants on the guided tour were delighted by what they heard and saw; there was much they had not known. The visitors were, for the most part, Swiss nationals. A sense of pride in the country’s achievements was palpable. The visit helps to raise awareness that the “Swiss democratic ideal” has a strong foundation.

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ <https://www.parlament.ch/centers/documents/de/parlamentsgebaeude-d.pdf>

<https://www.parlament.ch/centers/documents/en/broschuere-A5-e.pdf>

² Katharina Fontana, “Verträge mit Tücken”, Preface Pg. 8, <https://progress-foundation.ch/publikation/vertraege-mit-tuecken>

³ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Wiege_der_Eidgenossenschaft

⁴ Wording of the federal initiative “Safeguard Swiss Neutrality”:

“The Federal Constitution is changed as follows:

Art. 54a Swiss Neutrality

1) Switzerland is neutral. Its neutrality is perpetual and armed.

2) Switzerland shall not join any military or defence alliance, neither shall it cooperate with such an alliance, unless Switzerland is under military attack or such an attack is being prepared;

3) Switzerland shall not take part in armed conflicts between third countries and shall not impose sanctions against warring parties. Exceptions are made for sanctions decided by the United Nations (UN) and measures to prevent the circumvention of sanctions; and

4) Switzerland uses its neutrality to fulfil its role as mediator.