

A MANIFESTO FOR MULTILINGUAL FEDERALISM

Swiss federalism is universally considered to be an effective system, firmly established - as it is - in a country so long recognised, even envied, for its richness of tradition, good fortune and work ethic.

The culture of federalism can be seen everywhere: it is part of our very identity and our history. But recently the pattern of change in our society has been greatly accelerated, so that some of our old “certitudes” are less secure. The Swiss system, which we used to imagine would work indefinitely, now seems to be running out of steam.

As a result of linguistic demands, as well as cultural and economic needs, federalism is going from strength to strength in Europe and worldwide. Meanwhile, here we are, arguing vigorously over when, how and in what circumstances we should open our doors to the world. At the same time, each is aware of the qualities of federalism and convinced that Switzerland is a little paradise where we continue to live very well, side by side.

In Switzerland the number of well-integrated foreigners is particularly high; minorities are respected as nowhere else. It is a country where citizens vote on everything: from life imprisonment for dangerous criminals, or increases in VAT, to financing private schools, or the use of stem cells in scientific research. Such issues frequently occasion fierce debates between opposed camps. The populace regularly challenges the government and Parliament, shunning the ballot boxes to demonstrate its disapproval.

A TRUE DEMOCRACY

One third of the population (not always the same third) can carry the vote on any issue by just a small majority. In fact, when there is a low turnout for a ballot, as little as one sixth of the electorate can swing the vote, thereby “imposing” their choices on the rest of the population. Although this understandably worries many people, in itself it poses no threat to democracy. If we consider how little resentment is expressed by citizens after a vote, it is clear that the public values the voting system as a way of safeguarding the sovereignty of the people. This demonstrates one excellent characteristic of Swiss federalism: respect for the views of the majority.

Similarly, the minority feels that its views are respected.

And all of this is achieved against a background of changing economic, cultural, religious and linguistic minorities. Clearly, it is also to the credit of the majority that on each occasion they succeed in reaching one of our renowned Swiss compromises. This is achieved through a sincere quest for consensus, without fear of confronting - from the outset - that which would be glossed over elsewhere. Neither Schwarzenbach nor the vote against facilitating naturalisation for foreign nationals indicate that the Swiss are racist. Rather, these things illustrate the Swiss democratic spirit that faces up to facts and openly airing differences of opinion. Indeed, already numerous foreigners are completely integrated into our country. Also, there is a strong desire for further such integration, even if the world has shifted and things have changed dramatically over the past twenty years.

LANGUAGES AND AN EVOLVING FEDERALISM

Things have changed so much, that even the sacred quest for the great “Swiss compromise” – the key to our ability to live alongside each other – can sometimes be seen as old-fashioned and backward-looking. In an effort to be “modern”, we sometimes set aside matters which we have spent a long time debating, thinking that it would be better to remain silent on these “out of date” issues.

For example, consider the draft law concerning languages, a remarkable achievement which reflected the Swiss ability to find a middle-way to suit all. It was suddenly set aside by the Federal Government, which apparently decided that this law was not a priority and did not therefore merit the investment of a few million.

But then it is not a question of money; it is a question of conscience.

Coscienza Svizzera considers that the government has made a serious mistake in this matter. We are far from alone in thinking this; even Parliament loudly and clearly asked the Federal Government to reconsider its decision. We need to re-open the discussions about this law, to refine it, to develop the foundations of a new pattern of co-existence which respects linguistic minorities.

Coscienza Svizzera is therefore organising three evenings of discussion in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. The position of the Italian language in Swiss society will be the central issue for debate on these three evenings. Then, with the benefit of experience from this first round of debates in our own region, we shall move on - via the Gotthard Pass - to discuss the place of the different languages in the Swiss structure.

DISCUSSION RATHER THAN SILENCE

What we are hoping for are lively, intense discussions, organised informally and open to contributions from everyone. The meetings will be led by speakers who are experienced in leading lucid debates. Our meetings will be held in a marquee that can easily be moved from place to place, to enable us to meet up with those who are interested in these discussions. We shall start at la Piazza della Riforma in Lugano, then we shall meet on the Piazza del Governo in Bellinzona, passing via the Italian Grisons.

Coscienza Svizzera realises that a subject such as this may not attract large crowds, but we are convinced that the seriousness of the situation requires the involvement and support of the people, in the search for feasible solutions.

Swiss citizens have always been used to discussions about different languages taking place in various languages. We believe that the people are reluctant to be drawn into centralist solutions, which by definition are not "the Helvetian way". The public preference for a non-centralist style was clearly expressed in 1996 when - following ten years of debate - the people voted to accept a new clause in the constitution, regarding languages. This constitutional clause entirely protects even the least-spoken of our national languages. But even if this clause provides protection for the minorities on paper, there is still a need for regulations which will ensure its effectiveness. To use old expressions such as "native soil" does not help the debate along; such terms have lost their original meaning and carry unhelpful connotations. Similarly, while the principle of language communities (often known as "the territoriality of languages") is apparently a clear legal concept, it does not clarify for the public the way in which the different communities should interact.

It is a fundamental principle, but one which - in an environment that is becoming more complex by the day - absolutely must evolve.

A GROWING LINGUISTIC COMMUNITY AND MINORITY

What we are proposing here is an approach based on the notion of linguistic communities across "a varying geography". This innovative concept would encourage the minorities to expand beyond their traditional territories. Also, by generally heightening public awareness of the vitally important issues at stake with regard to language, it would invite the Swiss-German majority to assume a less dominant role.

To construct a popular consensus around this idea would be an excellent way for the majority to express its open-mindedness towards the growing minorities, an open-mindedness that would be inconceivable elsewhere. Only the Swiss, whose language issues have always been openly debated, can hope to construct vital popular consensus along these lines.

We must convey to the majority that bilingualism, as understood within the Belgian system, is not in the best interests of anyone in Switzerland. Some people naïvely consider that English (Anglo-American English) should be the future Swiss lingua franca, but an excessive hold on our culture by this language would mean the end of Switzerland.

The real richness of this country resides in our ability to live together in a multilingual society. It would be possible to add English without foregoing any of the national languages which have formed Europe.

The mass media are becoming increasingly influential in leading public opinion and bringing about democratic change. It will be essential for us to work through these media to convey to the public that the common good can best be served by adopting new approaches. Equally, these changes will be absorbed into our way of thinking through school-life, the melting-pot where different cultures learn to live together in mutual respect.

THE LAWS OF MARKET FORCES ARE NOT ENOUGH

In order to continue to understand one another and live harmoniously together, we need more than blind faith in the laws of the marketplace. We urgently need laws and regulations supported by the people, in order to provide Switzerland - along the lines laid out in the Constitution

- with a new model of how to live side by side, not only in terms of language but in general. The task is hard, but there are some positive indications. For example, there are the broadcasts from "Radio Rumantsch", which - as from 2005 - we can pick up anywhere in Switzerland, thanks to the generous sacrifices made by other radio stations. Or consider how, after long, difficult negotiations, we now have new arrangements to achieve financial parity between cantons; it will revolutionize solidarity amongst them.

Coscienza Svizzera intends to support these positive trends: we shall work to ensure that the question of languages becomes the object of fruitful debates, whilst never forgetting that words must be followed by deeds.

The action we intend to take is as summarized in this document: it involves the launch of an initiative on which we hope the Swiss people will soon be able to express themselves. The discussions in the marquee will show us whether it is realistic to aspire to a new structure founded on the existing, sound principles which are abundant in Switzerland.

That is why the will to build together must be on the agenda.

PROPOSAL FOR A POPULAR INITIATIVE: THREE PARAGRAPHS FOR CONSIDERATION AND DISCUSSION:

1 A second Swiss national language must be taught as a priority as part of the curriculum in compulsory education. No other foreign language will be taught before this national language.

2 The Confederation promotes and supports the teaching of a third Swiss national language.

3 National multilingualism is to be encouraged by the Confederation. This can be pursued through