

Historical background of the FANTASTIC PARLIAMENT

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1. BREATH OF ORIGIN

In the beginning, the three good giants who watched over the Switzerland of old were awoken by the piercing cries of a people suffering. An army that had descended from the north-east was destroying everything in its path, leaving a trail of destruction and despair in its wake.

Alerted by the clamour of clashing armour, the giants came hurtling down from their mountains. They met up in secret in the middle of a green pasture overlooking a beautiful lake the colour of azure and cobalt. They swore to help each other and took a solemn oath to unite against anyone who tried to attack the country again. The inhabitants of the valleys nestling between the lake and mountains eyed each other, almost alarmed at their own audacity. Freed from the power of the distant oppressor and the greed of his bailiffs, they were finally able to manage their affairs as they saw fit. The meadows, pastures, fields and surrounding forests were theirs again.

A wave of new aspiration spread across the country. Everyone was filled with hope, from small merchants to vagrants and farmers to craftsmen, because they saw that united, they would be strong.

Other towns joined the good giants and signed their charter: first Lucerne with its great wooden bridge, then Zurich, the trading town, followed by Zug and Glarus, on the frontline for defending the territory to the north of the barrier formed by the snow-capped peaks. Many years passed before Bern's great army of warriors joined the alliance.

The coalition partners were then able to spill over to the west, drawing in Fribourg, Solothurn and Basel, and to the east by winning over Schaffhausen. They were known to the neighbouring powers as the Confederates.

When the state of Appenzell joined the Confederation, expansion of the area was stopped in its tracks with a major clash of beliefs between the two sides. Charismatic reformers spread captivating new ideas across the land which threatened to dethrone the ancestral religion, although this was firmly established. The dark and manipulative Seeds of Discord were sown, colonising the hearts of the righteous and inciting them to intolerance and fanaticism.

War broke out, bringing its trail of misery and devastation. On the battlefield, the men were thirsty and starving. A hermit, dressed in old rags and with his long beard wrapped around him to keep him warm, appeared between the two camps. Strangely, the sight of this man and his repulsive appearance inspired kindness and goodness. He exuded an air of reconciliation.

Determinedly and fearlessly, he placed a cooking pot between the two camps and prepared a large pot of soup that the famished armies shared in the spirit of honest camaraderie. From that moment on, the soldiers refused to take up arms again against these men, whom they now considered brothers. That moment marked the end of the war.

1.1. Half a millennium of democratic aspiration

Switzerland grew into a country by fits and starts.

Three peasant communities in the central Alps, Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden (today Obwalden and Nidwalden), signed a defence pact in 1291. They were joined by several towns: first Lucerne, then prosperous Zurich, followed by Zug and Glarus.

When Bern, which was a strong military power in Europe, joined the alliance in 1353, the Confederates forces were strong enough to conquer Fribourg, Solothurn, Basel and Schaffhausen. After the canton of Appenzell joined the Old Swiss Confederacy in 1513, however, the expansion suddenly came to a halt, when the thirteen cantons of the Confederation faced the Reformation. Appenzell split into two half cantons, one Protestant and one Catholic, in 1597. The cantons that are both Protestant and Catholic, however, agreed to alternate the responsibility for governing the territories under their influence.

Napoleon redistributed the allied territories of the Confederation into six new Swiss cantons: Vaud, Ticino, Aargau, Thurgau, St. Gallen and Graubünden. In 1815, the Congress of Vienna recognised the permanent neutrality of the Confederation. Switzerland was extended to the west with the admission of the cantons of Valais, Neuchâtel and Geneva, and the Jura became part of the canton of Bern.

This established the country's borders as they are today. But dividing lines still partitioned the territory. In 1833, the city of Basel separated from the region around it, bringing Basel-Stadt (city) and Basel-Landschaft (country) into existence. In 1979, the northern, predominantly Catholic and conservative part of the Jura formed a new canton, while the southern, traditionally Protestant and liberal part of Jura remained part of the canton of Bern.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Federal pacts - National peace – Territorial peace](#)

[Federal pact - Oligarchisation](#)

2. SWORD OF HONOUR

Switzerland could not escape its destiny. The time came when some began to consider certain precepts from ancient times as archaic and outdated. A new breeze was blowing covertly across the land, like an elusive fairy. Some even said they had seen it: a shadow on the edge of a dark forest or a movement in the distance on a foggy plain or some strange marks left behind in the fields. Many people laughed at these fantasies but the more enlightened would not back down, filled with an intense excitement. The bold dreams that fascinated some were frightening to others. As pipedreams and fantasy evolved into revolutionary ideas, two distinct groups formed. Unconditional supporters of the adventures of the future and emancipation from the constraints of tradition were called liberals or even radicals. They believed that a centralised power would promote equality between the country's inhabitants. They believed in the rights of the individual, universal suffrage and freedom of the press.

Meanwhile, seven rural regions, all supporters of the proven ideas of the past, defended their independence and the rights of the Catholic Church. They formed a military coalition, the Sonderbund.

A foul odour hung in the air in the woods and thickets and the superstitious recognised the signs of an impending civil war.

No country emerges victorious from an internal struggle. The clash between two world views risked reducing the country to ashes. It would take an exceptional being to save the sacred union of the Confederation. A bear's strength needed to combine with a man's intelligence if blood was not to be spilled. The radicals went in search of a peacemaker whom they would appoint head of the confederate army and assign the title of general. This peacemaker had an incredible talent for strategy and stopped the rebellion in its tracks. Brandishing a scarlet flag, he managed to limit loss of life, both among the centralists and the separatists. Just by being there, he shook up the beliefs of the conservatives and persuaded the fanatics to change their ways and make compromises. The radicals, who had defeated the conservatives, promulgated a federal state with a two-chamber parliament based in Bern. The crimes of all those on Swiss territory would soon be judged according to the same law, and the emission of bank notes was entrusted to the Confederation via the Swiss National Bank. No more batzen, kreuzer, bluzger, soldi or denari – all Swiss people would now exchange Swiss francs and centimes. The times when the cantons issued their own money were over, to the benefit of all. The Confederates were very grateful to the peacemaker and gave him a sword of honour, a symbol of reconciliation and justice. He set off on his way, reappearing whenever resentment was stirred up between cantons or whenever the Confederation was at risk. Following his advice, the Swiss thereafter avoided getting involved in the battles of proud neighbouring powers.

2.1. Two world views

Modern Switzerland came into existence as a result of a clash between two world views. The conservative cantons in rural regions defended their independence and the prerogatives of the Catholic Church, while the liberal and radical-leaning cantons were in favour of a centralised federal state, equal rights, universal suffrage and freedom of the press.

After a brief civil war, the radicals won. On 12 September 1848 they promulgated a new constitution which established a bicameral Parliament, following the example of the United States.

The new constitution defined not only the political system but also the monetary and economic institutions, and established Bern as the federal town. In 1891, the right to issue banknotes was entrusted to the Confederation, which created the Swiss National Bank for this purpose. In 1898, criminal and civil law became the prerogative of the federal state.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Le Sonderbund](#) - [Ville fédérale](#) - [Pacte fédéral](#) - [Guillaume-Henri Dufour](#)

3. THE LUMINARIES

Since the dawn of time, our ancestors had lived through wars that raged through the regions of the Old World. Our fathers' fathers and our mothers' mothers saw the ancestral dogma become the stakes in merciless battles. They were there when, hanging like a shadow over the crimson land, the Discord was spread, plunging the country into darkness, consuming and silencing the people. It was against this apocalyptic backdrop, when day had been swallowed up by night, that they appeared.

Larger than the strongest men, they shone as white as the most dazzling marble. Their skin, although as soft and supple as delicate silk, seemed as hard as cut diamonds. Two majestic griffins flew around the fantastic trio, pushing away darkness with every flap of their wings.

Everything froze before this magical sight. Not a single human being could ignore the blinding celestial presence. Every man, woman and child came to listen to what these three female figures had to say. When the largest one, Helvetia, opened her mouth, the power of her words shattered the doom brought by the Discord and the people found their voices again. Men and women were instantly filled with a reverent awe and a blazing love. Spellbound, they listened to Helvetia and her companions. The celestial figures spoke with wisdom and discernment and their instructions were instantly etched into the souls of the Confederates. "All of you, men and women, young and old, are entitled to

freely express your thoughts and to live according to your fundamental beliefs. You may conclude contracts as you desire and possess property. And you have an obligation, not just a prerogative or a privilege, to exercise your rights. You must have your say in the decisions of the representatives and leaders that you choose." The words elevated the people, while the griffins continued their dance to bring light back to the country. Every time they passed over the spellbound heads of the crowd, a powerful force permeated the battered bodies of the Swiss and blessed them with new insight. "Your opinion has as much value as that of your neighbour, and as much weight as that of your leader."

The Swiss took their destiny into their own hands. They entrusted their representatives to draw up rules for living together in harmony and prosperity. But they kept the option of renouncing or modifying the fundamental charter of the Confederation at the ballot box. From that glorious day on, the people could vote on important issues concerning collective life. The trio, flanked by griffins and Iris goddesses, travelled across the land from east to west and north to south, proclaiming a peaceful, free and independent Switzerland.

Later, when the people erected a palace to house their elected representatives, they placed statues of their inspiration, Helvetia, and her two companions, Law and Good Governance, on the top of the building, along with the griffins. They are still there today.

3.1. The Swiss Confederation, the child of the Luminaries

The Swiss Confederation is the child of the luminaries. After having been subjugated, the Swiss cast off the yoke of subjugation and took charge of their own destiny. In a bid to defend their fundamental freedoms, they established popular rights in the communes and towns of the former Confederation which are still in force today.

The federal government and Parliament propose, and the people dispose. The Federal Constitution guarantees that each and every citizen in Switzerland is entitled to express their opinion, to live according to their beliefs, to conclude agreements, to own property and to exercise their rights. It also guarantees the separation of powers – the legislative (parliament), the executive (government) and the judiciary (courts).

Even though politicians, policy makers, scientists and others play a role in forming opinion, all ballots are carry equal weight at the ballot box. Citizens are able to voice their opinion on important issues and societal challenges in popular elections held on four Sundays in the year. Ballot issues vary greatly from the purchase of new fighter jets to spatial planning in the canton and local garbage collection. Popular rights give citizens the possibility to amend any decisions made by parliament by means of popular initiatives and referendums.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Les Lumières en Suisse - Constitutions suisses - Constitution fédérale](#)
[Séparation des pouvoirs - Formation de la volonté politique](#)

4. THE FOUR MERCENARIES

Switzerland started to take shape and the regions started to form with increasing precision. The country rose within its borders, like a majestic Tower of Babel, murmuring with a thousand dialects and patois. But it wouldn't take much for Discord to rear its ugly head again, spreading the sour smell of resentment across the land. Some inhabitants started to hatch dark plots. The cantons with the most widely-spoken dialects wanted to impose their language on others. Such ill-fated schemes threatened federal harmony and recognising the equality of the cantons became a matter of urgency. Four legendary mercenary soldiers were entrusted with enforcing this decree. They were given full powers to bring order to the country.

These dazzlingly handsome soldiers in their shining armour spoke in fiery tones from under their flaming beards. Even the most ruthless warriors would kneel down as they passed by.

The first soldier, a brazen look in his eyes, assembled the German-speaking Swiss cantons and made them into states. The second soldier grouped the French-speaking Swiss cantons around his glistening sword and made them republics. The third stretched his strong, bronze-coloured arms over the Italian-speaking canton, south of the snow-capped peaks, and into four valleys in Graubünden. Meanwhile, the fourth soldier planted his magnificent jet-black spear in the centre of the canton of Graubünden so that the speakers of Romansh – the smallest group among the Confederates – could gather around it.

But Discord cast its powerfully disruptive spell, and the Italian- and Romansh-speaking mercenaries had to force the French-speaking soldier to recognise them as his equals. As if by magic, the ragged old hermit with his long beard appeared beside the French, Italian and Romansh-speaking warriors. "The law of the strongest is not always the best!" "There is no such thing as a bad language, only bad people!" With his wisdom and humour, the old wise man restored peace and harmony among the three soldiers. However, the German-speaking soldier saw things differently. Emboldened by the support of the majority of the Swiss people, he defended his position. Eventually, however, he had to back down in the face of the determination of the other three. Although his pride was wounded, he agreed to sign the parchment guaranteeing that all Confederates are free to express themselves in their own language. German, French, Italian and Romansh were therefore declared national languages and each linguistic family was granted its own territory. The Swiss turned their diverse cultures into an asset. These days, their curiosity about others and their tendency to seek common ground offset their natural argumentative streak...

4.1. Did you say Confoederatio helvetica (CH)?

The Swiss Confederation – "la Suisse", "die Schweiz", "la Svizzera" and "la Svizra" – is quadrilingual.

- German is spoken in the cantons of Zurich, Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Glarus, Zug, Solothurn, Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft, Schaffhausen, Appenzell Innerrhoden and Appenzell Ausserrhoden, St. Gallen, Aargau and Thurgau.
- French is spoken in the cantons that share a border with France: Vaud, Neuchâtel, Geneva and Jura.
- French and German are spoken in the cantons located on the linguistic border: Bern, Fribourg and Valais.
- Italian is spoken south of the Alps, in the Ticino and in four valleys in Graubünden.
- Romansh is spoken by the country's smallest linguistic minority in the canton of Graubünden.

The Latin cantons of Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, Ticino, Valais and Vaud are, constitutionally speaking, *republics*, in reference to the French and Italian republics. The twenty other German-speaking cantons are constitutionally *states* (*Staat*, in German).

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):
[Confédération et cantons - Plurilinguisme - Dialectes](#)

5. ANCIENT WISDOM

A thick and freezing fog masked the beauty of the flowering meadows, extinguished the brilliance of the shimmering lakes and eclipsed the majesty of the towering peaks. Discussions were being held around long tables in the towns' inns. Even in the most remote locations, squabbles and skirmishes were disrupting the customary quiet of the taverns. The country was threatening to break up under the battering blows of Discord. The hearts of the Swiss were full of defiance and sparks were flying from the endless and heated debates. The Swiss people were suspicious of the institutions they had created to guarantee their liberty.

In their troubled minds, the Confederation was turning into an ogre with a voracious appetite, authoritarian and power hungry. They feared that the cantons and communes would lose their autonomy within the Confederation.

The old hermit, protector of the Swiss people, left his chilly valley in great haste. The ageless man had to show resolution and courage to put a stop to the theories being concocted throughout the land. A meeting of the representatives of the cantons had to be called. It was up to them to take action.

The delegates took the time to stop and re-read the history of the world's civilisations, to compare the organisations and rules of society and to weigh up their success. They came across an idea dating back to antiquity, which contained within it the seeds of the new world they aspired to. "A community begins where people live, in villages and towns," so the principle went. "It then extends to the sovereign territories, otherwise known as the cantons, and finally embraces the whole country". The solution was right there within their grasp. The units of power that were closest to the people, the communes, had to decide what they were capable of achieving themselves. The tasks that went beyond their competences would be delegated to the cantons and the Confederation would fulfil the obligations that were too large to be dealt with by the cantons and communes, such as national defence. The delegates were satisfied with their work and shook hands. They would now be able to give the country's fundamental charter their full support. At that moment, a bright light lit up the sky. The fog lifted and a multitude of winged creatures burst into a victory song in the languages of the original three giants. Every man, woman and child across the land grasped the meaning of the powerful chorus and started to chant: "Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno"*. The Swiss were captivated and knew right then that the founding principles of their country were right. The Swiss people passed this motto down from one generation to the next. And over the years, the Confederation, the cantons and the communes exercised their rights by trying not to infringe upon the sovereignty of the other levels of power.

*One for all and all for one.

5.1. Subsidiarity, a principle known since Aristotle's times

The Federal Constitution allocates tasks to the Confederation, the cantons and the communes according to the principle of subsidiarity, which has been known since Aristotle's times. The Confederation will only take on a task if the cantons are unable to assume it. The cantons, in turn, will only take on the tasks that the communes are unable to carry out.

In 1848, the Swiss franc replaced the various cantonal currencies. Customs, along with the post offices, the army and foreign policy, became the remit of the Confederation. After the Second World War, the seven members of the Federal Council assumed the responsibility of social security, energy, national roads, transport, spatial planning, the protection of the environment, scientific research, national radio and television and relations with Europe.

The cantons remained in charge of training, public health, the police and justice. They also had the option to sign agreements to join forces. The cantonal legislative systems were also now able to submit cantonal initiatives to the Federal Assembly.

The communes apply cantonal and federal law, and decide on local issues. They also have jurisdiction in the areas of security, education, health and transport, and hold registers of births, marriages and deaths.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

Subsidiarité_ - [Le fédéralisme et l'État fédéral](#)

6. THE CHAOS OF DESIRE

Large black clouds moved across the winter sky and the rays of sunshine could barely reach the frozen ground beneath. The icy embrace savagely slapped the people's ruddy faces but they kept their heads held high. Anticipation was etched on people's faces. Everyone knew, everyone could sense that a new era was nigh, the era of pioneers and builders. The tension and excitement were palpable. Something was about to happen. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when the inspiring Helvetia finally appeared. The figure of light breathed life back into this country, which was still but a few letters drawn on a piece of parchment. She gave the country the strength to become free and powerful. The task ahead was immense, but it didn't occur to anyone to complain or give up.

The Swiss longed to see the founding principles of their society become reality. They wanted to see the institutions envisaged in their fundamental charter brought to life by men of flesh and blood. They wanted to exercise their rights as citizens by electing the federal parliament. All over, men and women were spreading the word about the upcoming elections. In the towns and villages, from mountain peaks to valley floors, men were standing up for Switzerland.

The feeling of excitement reached fever pitch. Legions of powerful elected representatives moved forward to claim their place in Switzerland's history. There were so many of them that additional rounds of elections had to be held in order to decide between the different candidates. Some citizens were registered in more than one area in order to increase their chances of being elected.

The situation was so chaotic that additional elections had to be organised in some places. Especially as three members of the National Council had joined the inner circle of the Seven Wise Men who would lead the country.

Not everything went according to the rules – indeed, there weren't any rules in the absence of an electoral law. But the enthusiasm of the Swiss for public life and their irrepressible desire to leave an indelible mark on the life of their country was long cited as an example by neighbouring countries. This election was the keystone of the common venture. Helvetia observed her work with a sense of pride tinged with bitterness. Because women had been neglected – not even excluded, simply forgotten – in the first act of the Confederation.

6.1. Election of the first Federal Assembly in 1848

Elections to Switzerland's first parliament were held in October 1848. It was composed of 111 members of the National Council and 44 members of the Council of States. This election was more or less improvised. No date had been set, but the deputies had to be elected by Monday 6 November 1848 in order to attend the session to establish the councils.

The members of the Council of States were elected by the cantonal parliaments or by the People's Assemblies; the latter, at least, were elected by the people.

“The National Council is composed of representatives of the People, elected on the basis of one member per 20 000 people of the total population.” According to this provision of the Federal Constitution of 1848, the National Council of the first legislature would therefore have 111 members, whereby each canton and each half-canton was required to elect at least one representative.

The 1848 election of the National Council went down in the annals of history as having a record number of rounds of voting. Many candidates simultaneously ran for office in several constituencies, and these multiple candidacies led to additional elections. Three members of the National Council were also elected to the Federal Council.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Elections - Assemblée fédérale - Séparation des pouvoirs](#)

7. THE DEFEAT OF TREACHERY

The country basked in happy times; the days of war and suffering seemed to be over. The mountains were reflected in the lakes in all their splendour. The ethereal fragrance of insouciance perfumed the air. The days passed quietly and happily. Even night no longer belonged to darkness and every morning brought with it a bright and brilliant light.

But a shadow, hiding in the deepest valleys, bided its time. The conditions were ideal to secretly bring forth an invisible and elusive being: Treachery. As soon as it was born, it found its way into people's homes, soured good feeling and turned them against each other. Nobody noticed its poi-soned breath extinguishing the flame of unity. It let Discord reign again, reawakening all the past fears that had lain dormant during the happy times. Having been dazzled by the right of expression and freedom of thought for several decades, some now looked unfavourably upon the parliament. They no longer felt that the two founding parties of the Confederation represented them. They wanted to make room for new modes of thinking. They proposed that the representatives with the most votes from the largest parties should be elected.

The radicals and conservatives, conscious of their responsibilities, retorted that the new parties would defend their own interests over those of the whole community. However, the resistant members of parliament were finding it harder to sleep at night. During parliamentary sessions, they heard the plinth on which the statue of the Three Confederates stood cracking. And the three granite giants from the domed hall would appear in their dreams, smashing their way out of the Parliament Building. The elected representatives took this as a sign and encouraged the people and the cantons to accept the equality of man and ideas. They decided to put their confidence in those who had a new vision for the state and society.

7.1 Adoption of the system of proportional representation

Elections carried out according to the system of proportional representation make the federal chambers accessible to minorities, who obtain the number of seats corresponding to the number of votes they receive. This is not the case of the first-past-the-post system, according to which the person with the most votes is elected.

From the late nineteenth century, many voices called for the adoption of an election system which is fairer for all political parties. Edouard Gonin conducted a first study in 1878 on the impact of moving from a first-past-the-post system to a system of proportional representation. Josef Durrer, a politician from Obwalden, went on to conduct a more in-depth study and specifically demonstrated to what extent the first-past-the-post system disadvantages minorities. The Social Democrats claimed the new system would overturn the composition of the National Council, while the Statistical Office affirmed the contrary. The People and the cantons turned down the proposal twice in 1900 and in 1910, before 66.8% of the voters came out in favour of the new system. Since 1919, elections to the National Council have been carried out according to the system of proportional representation.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Systèmes électoraux - Partis](#)

8. THE GREAT ARCHITECT'S DESIGN

The three good giants closely followed the turn of events from their mountain tops. The Swiss had managed to overcome their differences, but it is well known that humans have short memories. The Confederates needed a strong symbol to remind them of the battles fought and the pacts sealed in their past.

The giants whispered to the Seven Wise Men who governed the country, telling them to create a book of stone symbolising the original Swiss people's dream of peace. A palace for the people where their elected representatives would hold parliamentary sessions. The three giants enlisted the help of Hans Wilhelm Auer, a great architect, to realise this monument celebrating the glory of the Swiss and their shared destiny. Straight away, the marble, granite, serpentine and molasse quarries sprang into action, and the best craftsmen were chosen to create and sculpt in stone a striking allegory of modern Switzerland. The titans, with their huge stature and colossal arms, brought the biggest rocks to the site so they could be worked on by the stonemasons.

The architect's inspiration seemed endless. Every statue, every scene, every date engraved on the facades evoked a prominent moment from Switzerland's history. He reserved the pride of place, in the centre of the building beneath the great dome, for a vast hall in the shape of a cross. The two council chambers located on the north and south side of the building would be the same height, signalling that their powers were equal. The building's structure would illustrate and symbolise how the parliament functioned. Hans Wilhelm Auer gave shape to the idea of an eternal Switzerland. He created a backdrop for new ideas, embellishing the National Council chamber with balconies, tribunes and a box reserved for foreign diplomats. He illustrated the origins of the Parliament on a fresco in the chamber of the Council of States.

The work came to an end when a bolt of lightning struck the three giants. They had just mounted the ribbed dome on its square based tambour on top of the building. The spirit of the place turned them to stone just as they renewed the original oath. Ever since, the members of the National Council and the Council of States have had to pass in front of three granite giants on their way to parliamentary sessions, and not without a shudder of reverent awe. In memory of the original bolt of lightning, the builder's successors brought light into the heart of the building, through glass roofs and giant stained-glass windows. Members of parliament can therefore look up to see not only the history of Switzerland but also to recall the myths of its origins.

8.1 The Parliament Building, a book of stone

Hans Wilhelm Auer, the architect of the Parliament Building, summoned the best Swiss craftsmen and artists to carve a monumental and captivating allegory of modern Switzerland in granite, marble, serpentine and molasse from the different regions of Switzerland.

Occupying the place of honour at the centre of the building, a vast hall in the shape of a cross lies beneath the large dome. The 200 members of the National Council and the 46 members of the Council of States pass through here to reach their respective chambers. Both chambers are of equal standing; the structure of the building is the unequivocal expression of the perfect two-chamber system of the Swiss parliament.

Hans Auer dreamt of giving shape to an eternal Switzerland. He immortalised the golden age of the Old Swiss Confederacy shortly after the Swiss victories over the Duchy of Burgundy. He used the style and materials from an era of splendour that left its mark on Switzerland's towns and cities. He recreated a council chamber from the early 16th century for the cantonal representatives. The balconies, galleries and boxes for foreign diplomats in the National Council Chamber are reminiscent of an Italian theatre, providing a setting for new ideas.

As we enter the 21st century, the architect's successors let the sun shine into the heart of the building through the glass roofing and colossal stained-glass windows on the third floor. The members of parliament can read Switzerland's future in the sky, which is visible everywhere in the building's newly converted upper storey.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Palais fédéral](#) - [Parlement](#) - [Hans Auer](#)

9. QUEST FOR BALANCE

Switzerland possessed many virtues when the men and women created it. The pluralist, colourful and varied people of the Confederacy united around a high ideal. But they hadn't completely lost their ancient thirst for conquest and power over others. The hermit protector of the Swiss people was drawn out of his solitude to attend the grand assembly of the cantons, tasked with establishing the rules of parliament. He suggested creating two councils, one to represent the people and the other the sovereignty of the cantons.

The old man, his beard floating around him like a translucent cloud, was sunk deep in thought. All was silence, charged with hope. "The two councils must have the same powers. Neither must be able to prevail over the other," he declared, smiling slightly. He had found a way to obtain rational rules for collective life and to curb the fanatic zeal of the ardent. The People's Chamber became the one of bold thought, while the Chamber of the Cantons would soon be marked by moderation and pragmatism. But the two councils would have to agree on every new text before it could enter into law.

On these two platforms of the Federal Assembly, the legislative powers would therefore sometimes lean this way and then that until a balance could be struck. In the first chamber sessions, the parliamentary debates were like a game of chess. In order to influence the final decisions, the elected representatives developed strategies and alliances. Adversaries therefore formed alliances in order to modify one or other foundation of collective life.

The fundamental charter and the Swiss people's rules of society changed to adapt to new realities. As awareness increased, the values shared by the majority progressed. As the hermit had wanted, the representatives elected by the people no longer sought to impose their ideas using force or violence. They allowed the Swiss people to mature slowly and accepted the temporary victories over their ancestral fears and instincts.

9.1. Two councils with identical powers

In Switzerland's bicameral system, one council cannot prevail over the other one. The two parliamentary chambers have exactly the same powers and the same prerogatives. They must agree on a text before it can be adopted.

If there is no party agreement, the parliamentary groups adopt a position on the items to be discussed. The alliances vary depending on the topics and strategies.

Since the major political forces of Switzerland are represented in the Federal Council, the members of the Federal Council must find compromises as a collegial body to attract broad support in Parliament. The Swiss political system may well be slow, but it is one of the most stable in the world.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Bicamérisme - Groupes parlementaires - Démocratie de concordance](#)

10. VOICE OF HOPE

While despots and evil entities continued to impose their every will in the countries living by the precepts of the Old World, Switzerland was solidly taking shape, starting at the bottom. Once reunited, the citizens possessed absolute power in the face of their authorities. They chose their representatives in parliament, who then elected the Seven Wise Men to govern the country. No single man, woman, ogre or Cyclops could claim control of the people or set themselves up as master.

From birth, the people of this country were enveloped in a powerful magic. Like a gentle chant, like a lullaby, it calmed the spirits of the young and gave children a taste for choosing their own destiny. Children would listen carefully to family discussions and their instruction would continue year after year. By the time they were 18, young people knew how to defend their opinions and debate the issues affecting Swiss society. They congregated solemnly around the ballot boxes. A seed of eternal light descended upon them, struck their chests and gave them the power to decide the future of their country. Finally on an equal footing with their fathers, their time had come. It was their turn to write Swiss history. But first of all they would have to learn how to make good use of this brand-new power.

As is the case nowadays, people were first and foremost citizens of their village and canton before being citizens of the Swiss Confederation. The ballot paper allowed people to choose the authorities of the smallest sovereign entities, the communes, then the members of the cantonal parliaments and the cantonal governments. And if one or other of these heralds won a seat under the grand dome of the Swiss Parliament Building, they experienced the intoxicating taste of victory. The extraordinary political power young people were granted when they turned 18 was also an opportunity. Anyone could stand for election and shape the destiny of his or her commune, canton or the Confederation. Every young man and woman was given the opportunity to pursue the dream of Switzerland's original three good giants.

10.1. Representatives of the people

Swiss people are citizens of a commune, and therefore of a canton, before being a citizen of Switzerland. They may vote from the age of 18 and elect their representatives to the communal, cantonal and national authorities. The electorate decides who gets a seat in the federal parliament.

Every one of the 200 members of the National Council represents around 38,000 people. Uri, with a population of 35,000, has one seat in the National Council, and Zurich has 35. The seats are allocated according to the population of the cantons and the strength of the parties in the different constituencies.

Each of the 23 full cantons elects two representatives to the Council of States. Members are elected according to the first-past-the-post system in all cantons with the exception of the cantons of Jura and Neuchâtel, which use the proportional system.

The two cantons of Basel, the two cantons of Appenzell, Obwalden and Nidwalden each have only one seat in the Council of States.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Voting rights - The National Council/Council of States](#)

11. METAMORPHOSIS

Like everyone else, they worked, raised their children and sorted out their day-to-day problems. But as if by magic, as soon as they were elected to represent their fellow countrymen, they were transformed. Something would light up inside and they were able to see what troubled their fellow citizens with exceptional insight. This extraordinary and incredible metamorphosis of men – and much later – women who entered the federal parliament amazed the neighbouring countries, especially those of the Old World, when they visited the great architect's palace. The candidates, both men and women, who were chosen by their fellow citizens were wholeheartedly committed to embodying the virtues of the nation.

Once they had taken the solemn oath before the presidents of the councils and lifted three fingers of their right hand or placed their hand on their chest right next to their heart, they were bound by a promise to serve their country. The power they had been given in taking the oath helped them resist Discord and combat foul Treachery. These ordinary people became capable of fighting to defend their own ideas without losing sight of the common good. Their imagination produced a host of new ideas to improve the daily lives of their fellow citizens. They would propose, discuss, modify, adopt or reject new bills. They would also keep an eye on the government's accounts and report any corrupt practices. The lives of the elected representatives revolved around the people, and having been elevated to the status of thinkers and philosophers, the only time they would be able to enjoy a simple life as ordinary citizens again was when they returned to their families. But only until the next parliamentary session.

11.1. Part-time politicians

The representatives of the Swiss people are part-time politicians. They meet for a three-week session four times a year in Bern, while remaining an active part of civil society. Since they share power with the people, they need to keep in touch with them.

They launch new ideas to improve the life of the national community. They propose, discuss, amend, adopt or reject new draft legislation, and the government is accountable to them for its actions.

The National Council and the Council of States sit in joint session as the United Federal Assembly to elect the government of the Swiss Confederation and its president. The Federal Assembly also elects the Federal Chancellor, the judges of the federal courts and the commander-in-chief in the event of a threat of war.

In addition, the Federal Assembly approves international agreements, with the exception of those for which the Federal Council is responsible, and oversees the Federal Administration.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Système de milice](#) - [Statut juridique des parlementaires](#) - [Indemnités, infrastructure dont les parlementaires disposent](#) - [Représentation et intérêts](#) - [Le rôle de l'Assemblée fédérale au cours du temps](#)

12. BIRTH OF A MASTERPIECE

The alchemists of the law hid themselves away, off the long, labyrinthine corridors of the Parliament Building, tucked away deep within the many rooms, which swarmed with all kinds of activities. In these lairs, protected by towers of old books of wisdom, they meandered among the parchments and writings of the guardians of the Confederation. These magicians would capture the new ideas initiated by the people, the cantons' schemes, the visions of the members of parliament and the ambitions of the country's Seven Wise Men.

Then, in secret, in their laboratory, they would transform these fanciful ideas into the basis of a new life for the Swiss people. Slowly and meticulously created from very fine grains of sand, these ideas were melted down and turned into huge, unpolished mirrors. As for the people, they would only accept a true likeness. The mirrors therefore had to be put to the test. Experts and preparatory committees examined and polished, being careful not to break them. The mirrors would come out of this careful treatment even more honed and shining. Then came the ultimate test and the crucial moment that everyone had been waiting for.: the mirrors were scrutinised by the councils.

The magic objects were then shuttled to and fro inside the Parliament Building. Little by little, one layer at a time, many skilful hands would hone and perfect the shiny surface.

Once a mirror was gleaming, illuminated by the spirit of conciliation, it finally projected a perfect image of the law. The satisfaction of seeing something accomplished would fill the hearts of the people and their representatives with pride. But if, by some misfortune, the elected representatives, the councils, the Seven Wise Men or the judges failed to keep their promises, the mirror of the law would shatter into a thousand pieces, as easily as a gust of wind on a crystal glass. But there were already other mirrors waiting to be polished.

12.1. Creating a masterpiece – Emergence of an act

It takes time and energy to create a masterpiece. The legislative machinery requires ideas to be set in motion. The public, the cantons, the members of parliament and parliamentary bodies, and the Federal Council all work together to build society.

A closer look will show you that transforming ideas into legislation is an act of alchemy. The government's reforms are submitted for consultation, then the draft legislation is debated in both chambers. Once the councils decide to process the parliamentary initiatives, the parliamentary committees prepare a draft.

The Drafting Committee of one of the two chambers carefully examines the new draft legislation. It consults experts, government officials and the federal councillors concerned and, ultimately, delivers a new version at the plenum. The second council will then, in turn, examine the initial draft legislation and the amendments proposed by the other council.

The draft legislation can shuttle back and forth up to three times before the councils agree on a compromise. If they are unable to reach an agreement, a meeting of conciliation, composed of members of both chambers, makes a take-it or leave-it proposal.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Organisation, méthodes de travail - Lois - Commissions parlementaires](#)

13. TABLES OF GRANITE

There was one combat that had tormented Helvetia for so long that it ended up leaving an indelible mark on the country's memory. It was a difficult and bitter struggle, fought far from the battlefields. Not a physical war between people, but a confrontation between the minds of men and women.; a fundamental clash that continues to this day. The old granite slabs that had been patiently pounded by previous generations were recovered while digging the deep foundations for the Parliament Building. It was difficult to decipher the mysterious signs, but what a surprise it was when they were finally cracked. The text, which dated back to ancient times, described a civilisation that was harmonious, just and equal, with authority shared between men and women.

Everyone was shocked. The revelation of Switzerland's golden age shook up the emerging nation. Even before Treachery could rear its ugly head, the battle lines had formed. Many men considered women as beings that needed protection. In return, they expected submission and obedience from the opposite sex. The idea of a woman being equal to a man was madness to them and they were prepared to do anything to fight it.

But the age of heresy and being burnt at the stake was over, and angry women were taking a stand. Encouraged by the writings which had come to light, they were determined to fight a ruthless battle for their civic and political rights.

When the first calls for emancipation exploded in the faces of the most ferocious conservatives, the women's fierce will caused them to recoil. Yet it took a century for men to finally recognise women as fully-fledged citizens. When the first women entered Parliament, Helvetia savoured her triumph. But only for a short moment: she knew that the path to equality between men and women would be long. Discord could resurrect the ancestral fears at any time...

13.1. The voice of female voters

"One woman, one vote": Swiss women had to wait until February 1971 for the right to vote and to be elected. They fought for more than a century, from 1868, to gain access to the ballot box. In the parliamentary elections in autumn 1971, Swiss voters elected ten women to the National Council and one woman to the Council of States. A few days later, an eleventh female member of the National Council even replaced a man elected to the Council of States.

In 1977, Elisabeth Blunschy (Christian Democratic People's Party, CVP) from the canton of Schwyz was the first woman to be elected president of the National Council, and hence the first woman to become what is referred to as the highest-ranking person in the country.

The lawyer Josi Meier (Christian Democratic People's Party, CVP) from the canton of Lucerne was the first woman to be elected president of the Council of States. Her speech at the women's meeting in 1991 will always be remembered: "I now understand what the men who claim a woman's place is in the home are saying. They are right. They mean the house where the communal authorities meet, where the cantonal authorities meet and where the federal authorities meet."

The number of women elected to the National Council increased rapidly at first, and then slowed down. Today, 62 of the 200 members are women, or three out of ten. There were as many as eleven women in the Council of States at the beginning of the millennium. Now, there are nine women, amounting to one fifth of the Council's members.

It took only ten years for female members and their male counterparts to enshrine the equal rights of both sexes in the Constitution. On the other hand, they had to wait 25 years to celebrate the entry into force of the Federal Act on Gender Equality.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):
[Suffrage féminin](#) - [Egalité féminine](#) - [Egalité](#)

14. THE SOVEREIGN'S SCEPTRE

Never, ever, since time immemorial have we seen the lord of a kingdom, a tribe or a species submit its decisions to its people and accept their verdict. However, this is the case in Switzerland since the country turned its back on the Old World. Learning its lessons from past battles and uprisings, the little land of the Helvetians has sought a way of guarding itself against any future attempts at subjugation.

The alliance between the first Confederates was already a fundamental expression of the desire to stand up to government and to share power. This desire can be felt even more strongly in the New Nation. Its citizens draw their swords every time they go to the polls. It is they who decide and they who retain the power to make or break not kings, but laws. The hard-won power of the people is the invisible bond holding together the individual regions that decided to unite their destinies so long ago. The souls of the people ring out in unison when the moment comes to go to the polls, from the mountains in the south to the hills in the north. The sceptre of opinion and sovereignty is in the hands of the people, and the Parliament is their servant.

14.1. The electorate has the final say

The Swiss electorate is the sovereign power in the Parliament Building in Bern. The sceptre is its sceptre. It is the guardian of the Federal Constitution and must be consulted if Parliament proposes to amend this fundamental charter.

The electorate embodies the opposition in Switzerland, the country of consensus. Since 1848, nearly a third of the 214 mandatory referendums have been accepted and 93 of 169 laws rejected, after having been put to the test of the ballot box by 50,000 citizens.

The electorate is also makes proposals in the form of popular initiatives. It can propose to add new articles to the Constitution by collecting 100,000 signatures within 18 months. Popular initiatives are rarely approved by a double majority of both the electorate and the cantons. However, if Parliament prepares a counter-proposal in response to a popular initiative, the electorate is likely to be convinced.

Swiss citizens will vote if they feel competent and sufficiently informed about the issues involved. Average election turnout is around 45% and can reach 80% when important issues are voted on.

Links to the Swiss Historical Dictionary (in french):

[Droits politiques - Abstentionnisme - Démocratie](#)

[Votations - Référendum populaire](#)