OCCASIONAL PAPER 27

Swiss Lessons for Europe?

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This week Switzerland holds its national elections, while in Lisbon the EU leaders agreed on a new treaty. The two events have no direct connection, because Switzerland is not an EU member. However, a Swiss would have little difficulty understanding the EU's institutional quarrels. Switzerland has been successfully dealing with the challenge of keeping a multi-confessional, multi-lingual society together for more than 150 years, while respecting a large degree of autonomy for its 26 cantons.

Unwittingly the EU has come up with institutional solutions that often resemble features of the Swiss political system: Ahead of this summit, the EU members have fought hard over the concept of a double majority by which decisions should be adopted by a majority of states, representing at the same time a majority of the population. A double majority is required in Switzerland for legislation to be adopted: The majority of the Parliament and the majority of the second chamber, representing the cantons, have to agree. The same goes for national referenda, which are only won if a majority of the population and a majority vote in at least half the cantons is secured.

The EU's executive, the European Commission, is widely considered to be a faceless bureaucracy, with commissioners being appointed on the basis of nationality rather than merit or popularity. Switzerland is governed for decades by a sort of national-unity government, in which all major parties are represented. The President of the Swiss executive is elected only for a one-year term, because the Swiss do not like over-personalisation of politics. As the Swiss, the EU came up with the idea of rotating

presidencies, however exercised until now by member states which chair the Council. But here again the EU will follow the Swiss example, with the new treaty providing for an EU President to be elected for a short 2 ½ years term.

Given the rotating presidency, Swiss national politicians tend to be unknown and national politics perceived to be somewhat technocratic. The result has been little voter mobilisation for national elections with voter turn-out hovering under 50%. A similar perception of European politics has resulted in turn-out rates under 50% in elections to the European Parliament.

The Swiss cantons guard jealously over their prerogatives and – as in other federal system – legislative power rests with the cantons if not otherwise stipulated. The EU also operates on the basis of powers transferred to it by the member states. And there are other parallels between Switzerland and the EU, such as extensive translations efforts and choosing a lesser city as a capital. Obviously there are also a number of significant differences, the greatest of which is that Swiss voters are engaged in policy-making through referenda. In some countries EU-Europeans can block the occasional treaty, but have otherwise no direct say in EU affairs.

The Swiss feel however that they are becoming more 'normal' after an election campaign with unprecedented levels of political polarization and personalization. While some hope that this shakes up the cosiness of a consensus-driven political system, others fear that the resulting tensions may in the long term erode the foundations of Swiss unity. They wonder if their heterogenuous country would hold together without the glue of political consensus.

That is also one of the EU's greatest challenges: If the Union became more democratic as it should, but more polarised as a result, would Europeans accept to be out-voted on a European scale? Would they accept decisions that are taken by majorities of Europeans and member states, even though these decisions may not be supported by a majority in their own country and their own government?

Switzerland's exceptional political system has been a successful response to the challenge of uniting a people divided by languages and religion. It is to be seen how the system will fare if it becomes less exceptional. The EU is struggling to find a model to unite a continent divided by language, history and borders. Its response has been even more unorthodox than Switzerland's, creating a political system in which it is difficult even to identify the executive and the legislative branch of power. Making the EU more 'normal' and more democratic is desirable but risky at the same time.

Berlin, 18 October 2007