

SWITZERLAND WORKS, and it works very well. With a population of only 7.3 million, Switzerland is one of the wealthiest, most democratic and least violent countries in the world, with the most decentralised social welfare system. Founded in 1291 the Swiss Confederation may be the most sustainable nation-state of all time.

Situated in the heart of Europe, Switzerland has always existed in a state of tension between opening and closing its borders to the outside world. Even today it has nearly one million 'guest workers'. For centuries it has been an area of settlement and a transit region of European north-south commerce.

Over the past 700 years Switzerland has developed a unique social and political structure with a strong emphasis on federalism and direct democracy which brings together its twenty-six cantons (small states) and four languages and cultures — German, French, Italian, and Romansch. Its cantons enjoy considerable autonomy. One finds a host of local and regional cultures and traditions melded into a patchwork of sights and events that are 'typically Swiss'.

As Austrian economist Leopold Kohr once noted, the Swiss have solved their minority problems by "creating minority states rather than minority rights". Switzerland has a coalition government with a rotating presidency in which the president serves for only one year. Many Swiss do not know who of the seven Federal Councillors in the government is the president since he or she is first among equals.

In Switzerland a French-speaking Swiss may live in the canton of Neuchâtel, belong to the Roman Catholic Church, and participate in French culture yet still be subject to federal laws. But Swiss cantons possess a considerable amount of political clout.

Direct Democracy

A petition signed by one hundred thousand voters can force a nationwide vote on a proposed constitutional change. The signatures of only fifty thousand voters can force a national referendum on any federal law passed by Parliament.

THE SWISS MODEL

The world can learn much from the example of Switzerland, where government functions on the principle of human-scale.

Several cantons still follow the centuries-old traditions of 'open-air parliaments' each spring. Others are experimenting with voting over the internet. However, it is at the commune level that Swiss democracy is most direct. There are 2,902 communes in the Swiss Confederation, each run by a local authority, enjoying a high degree of independence.

Swiss Neutrality

Switzerland has not been involved in a foreign war since 1515, and has remained neutral since 1815. It has never been part of a larger empire. Swiss foreign policy is based on four premisses: (1) Switzerland will never initiate a war; (2) It will never enter a war on the side of a warring party; (3) It will never side with one warring party against another; (4) It will defend itself against outside attack.

Even though Geneva is home to many agencies of the United Nations, only recently did the Swiss vote to join the UN. They have consistently rejected membership in the European Union, however, the Swiss do trade with EU member nations.

In terms of foreign aid contributed to Third World countries, the Swiss contribute nearly three times the percentage of Gross National Income contributed by the United States.

Public Services

Despite fierce independence, Swiss

towns, villages and cantons co-operate on major infrastructure projects involving the public interest including railways, highways, tunnels, electric energy, water supply, and pollution abatement.

Many Swiss villages are linked by a network of passenger trains. Through efficient, high-quality railways, village residents have easy access to neighbouring villages as well as larger cities such as Geneva and Zurich. The railways provide a sense of connectedness to the rest of the country and to Europe. Geneva and Zurich are consistently ranked among the ten best cities in the world in which to live.

In the highly decentralised Swiss health-care system it is possible for patients, physicians, clinics, hospital and insurance providers to be in community with one another. Ninety-five per cent of all Swiss citizens are insured against illness by one of four hundred health insurance funds. The Swiss health-care system is second to none; the infant mortality rate is among the lowest in the world.

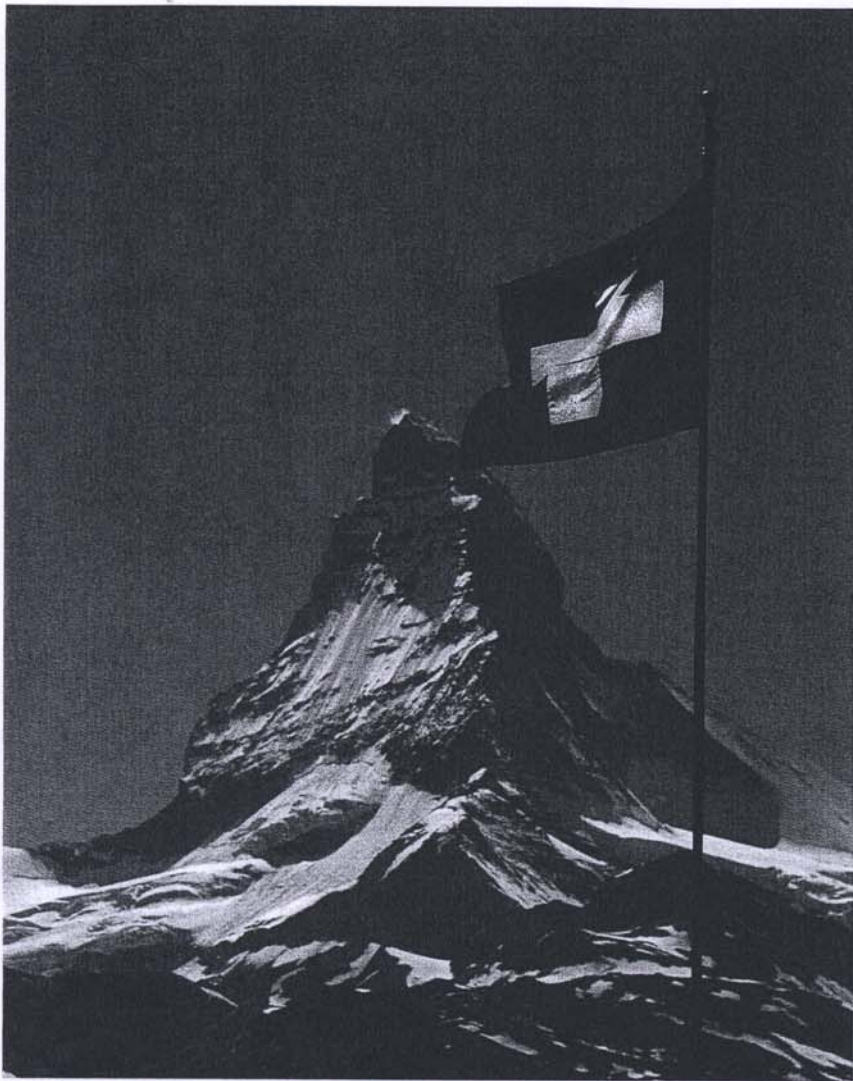
Although the Swiss constitution stipulates that "the right to sufficient and free primary education is guaranteed," there is no federal or national Department of Education. Rather, education is governed by the different cantons. Kindergarten is voluntary and free. Swiss children are taught in small schools the virtues of self-sufficiency, hard work, co-operation, and loyalty to family and community.

The Swiss practise complete decentralisation of the responsibility for social welfare. The inescapable conclusion engendered by a visit to Switzerland is that Switzerland works, because it is a tiny, hard-working, democratic country with a strong sense of community.

Alpine Villages

Scattered throughout the Swiss Alps and neighbouring Austria, Bavaria and Northern Italy are dozens of small villages, all of which are several hundred years old — each possessing a strong sense of community.

The church is often the centre of village spiritual life, as well as social life. Friends meet at the market, the pub, the inn, the post office and the



The Swiss national flag flies on the Riffelalp with the Matterhorn behind.

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN CLEAR/MOUNTAIN CAMERA PICTURE LIBRARY

churchyard to catch up on village news. The severe winters create an environment encouraging co-operation, sharing, and trust. In these villages, one finds a sense of continuity where the generations are born, grow up, remain, and eventually die.

Protective agricultural policies have made it financially viable for families to remain in the countryside. In most Alpine villages, there is an inexorable commitment to the land. A gift of land from one's parents carries with it a moral obligation of continued stewardship.

Swiss Agriculture

Even though only four per cent of Swiss people live on farms, they manage to produce two-thirds of the foodstuff consumed annually by the entire country. So important is agriculture to Swiss culture, and ultimately to the Swiss economy, that the

Berne government has devised a creative system of direct payments to farmers over and above the income they receive from their produce, remunerating them for the services they provide to the population as a whole. These services include managing the rural landscape, managing the natural heritage, ensuring food supplies, and encouraging decentralisation. Payments are made to farmers only if farm animals are kept under animal-friendly conditions, a suitable area is set aside for the maintenance of environmental balance, crops are rotated and soil quality is perfected. The sophisticated payment formula also takes into consideration the farmer's age and income level as well as farm size and the number of farm animals. In Switzerland, sustainable agriculture is left neither to chance nor to the market alone.

I BELIEVE SWISS federalism offers a proven alternative political system for dealing with some of the political trouble spots of the world. Take Iraq, for example. The Bush administration's futile attempt to impose a unified government on the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds in Iraq is doomed to failure. Without some rational way for the competing ethnic groups to share power, Iraq will remain in a state of chaos. The name of the game is co-operative independence. That's what the Swiss matrix is all about. No trouble spot could benefit more from the Swiss way of thinking than the territory occupied by the Israelis and Palestinians.

Tension between the Spanish government and Basque separatists might be diffused if both sides embraced a more co-operative view of the world rather than a zero-sum view. Again the Swiss model might help. The Russians could learn a great deal from the Swiss in terms of how to cope with Chechnya and other regions which may seek independence from Moscow.

Rather than continuing to centralise power in Brussels and reduce the autonomy of its individual member nations, the European Union should devote more energy to emulating Switzerland rather than the United States of America.

Created by a shotgun marriage at the end of the First World War, Yugoslavia began to come unravelled about ten years after its Communist dictator Tito died in 1980. If Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia had spent more time studying the Swiss Confederation there might have been a lot less violence and bloodshed.

In the continent of Africa there are over 800 ethnic groups, each with its own language, religion, and culture. Arbitrarily imposed on Africa during the period of European colonial rule were approximately sixty geo-political boundaries defining what are today either independent countries or other political units. Not surprisingly, these crazy arbitrary political boundaries have resulted in a high degree of political instability throughout the region. Superimposing the Swiss model on all of Africa is obviously an impossible dream. But bringing Swiss thinking to bear on Africa is not.

The world can learn a lot from the example of Switzerland; go small, decentralise! ●