

SWITZERLAND REJECTS THE UNITED NATIONS

C. L. ROBERTSON

On March 16, 1986, the Swiss government held a national referendum to decide whether it should apply for membership to the United Nations. The membership proposal was defeated by a margin of three to one. In this paper, C. L. Robertson examines the reasons for the outcome of the referendum. He argues that the decision was a product of the electorate's poor opinion of the UN as well as its perception that membership would deprive Switzerland of its neutral status.

INTRODUCTION

These are days of renewed interest in the United Nations. The Soviets speak of strengthening the UN and have agreed to pay their arrears, while the UN-sponsored talks seeking a settlement in Afghanistan make front page news. The world press, however, gave only brief attention to another matter involving the UN. On March 16, 1986, to the surprise of many who did not even know that Switzerland had never joined the UN, the Swiss people rejected their government's proposal to seek full UN membership by an overwhelming vote of three to one.¹

In addition to the government, UN membership was supported by three of the four major political parties, most newspapers and numerous civic organizations. Yet, even in the Canton of Geneva, seat of the UN's European headquarters and of the International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.), 70 percent of the voters rejected the proposal.² Although observers expected the government to lose, the wide margin of the defeat was astonishing. Given the renewed interest in the UN, the event deserves closer scrutiny than it received outside Switzerland, for the decision sheds light on public perceptions of the UN while providing insight into how domestic politics affect foreign policy.

Switzerland bases its foreign policy on the twin pillars of armed permanent neutrality and international solidarity. The latter is demonstrated by its management of the I.C.R.C., work with and for refugees, and representation of the interests of belligerents or countries with no diplomatic relations. Switzerland is a member of virtually all the specialized agencies of the UN and of a wide variety of other international organizations, with the notable exceptions

C.L. Robertson is a professor of Government at Smith College.

1. Forschungszentrum für schweizerische Politik, *Analyse der eidgenössischen Abstimmung vom März 16 1986* (Berne: Forschungszentrum für schweizerische Politik, University of Berne, June 1986).

2. Ibid.

of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It also participates in the deliberations of the seven committees of the UN General Assembly, although it has no seat or vote.

Switzerland has a population of only 6.5 million, but it ranks 23rd in terms of GNP, 12th in volume of trade, and third in financial transactions.³ It is, as those favoring membership pointed out, heavily dependent upon an orderly world political, trade and monetary system. Accordingly, it has ratified many international treaties negotiated and signed within the purview of the UN. Post-referendum polling revealed that two-thirds of those who voted against membership supported an active world role for Switzerland. Many opponents of membership agreed with Deputy Max Affolter who, following the vote, told the newspaper *L'Hebdo*: "the sovereign people has not condemned the foundations of our foreign policy. Our collaboration in international organizations, good offices, development aid . . . must continue."

A paradox therefore arises in the outcome of the vote. Why did a nation devoted to international solidarity, in a small country deeply enmeshed in international affairs, vote so heavily against joining the UN? Post-mortems offered several explanations, such as a disenchantment with the UN itself, a perception that costs would outweigh benefits, and a distrust of government motivations for seeking membership. While these factors were important components contributing to the referendum result, the vote can only fully be understood with reference to the Swiss tradition of neutrality and to the unique character of Switzerland's political system.

The Swiss political tradition is based on the concept of direct democracy, most frequently associated with Rousseau's idea that the government is merely the executive that carries out the will of the "sovereign" (the people). Modern necessities have led to the growth of representative democracy in Switzerland with increased power for the elected legislature. The tradition of direct democracy, however, has retained remarkable vigor in the form of the referendum.

In the vast majority of countries, foreign affairs are entirely in the hands of the executive. But in Switzerland and the United States, the executive's freedom to conduct foreign policy is greatly circumscribed. However, even the United States does not have the constitutional requirement for the popular approval of treaties by means of referenda. Nor does the populace have the frequent opportunity to express its views on issues of public policy in such a direct fashion that is binding on the government.

Swiss rejection of UN membership was not simply a result of the issues involved in joining the UN. It also stemmed from the lessons of its history and from the structure of its political authority, where strong cantonal differences have resulted in a vigorous tradition of local liberties. The UN vote came at a time when this tradition had been revived by an electorate who suspected politicians of using the excuse of modern times to enhance their own power.

3. International Monetary Fund, *International Financial Statistics 1986* (Washington D.C.: International Monetary Fund, 1986).

THE HISTORICAL TRADITION OF NEUTRALITY

The tradition most closely linked to that of local liberties is that of neutrality. If national myths exist to bind together a polity, then the myth of neutrality is fundamental to Switzerland.⁴ It is a country with ill-defined natural borders, consisting of communities with different histories, languages and religions, and internally divided by mountain ranges. Until recent times the cantons were frequently in armed conflict with one another and often linked by alliances to foreign powers.

The concept of neutrality dates to the defeat of Switzerland as a great military power in 1515.⁵ At that time the confederation faced two options: it could either remain a military power and create a centralized despotic political order like that of its neighbors, or it could remain neutral and maintain its decentralized system. It opted for the latter course. The term "neutrality" first appeared in an official document in 1536, though it was not used by the Diet until 1674.

The Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries and the clashes between dynastic and republican principles in the 18th and 19th centuries, led to continental wars that tore Europe apart. The struggles put tremendous strains on Swiss political unity. Cantons and factions within the country sided with one or the other party, while outside groups sought support within Switzerland or criticized it for being neutral. After the period of Napoleonic domination, in 1815, the Great Powers formally recognized and guaranteed Switzerland's permanent neutrality, making it a part of international law. However, this neutrality was threatened by bitter internal conflicts and continued pressure from the Great Powers.⁶ These recurrent threats contributed to the strengthening of the central government in the Constitutions of 1848 and 1874, and to the formation of a national Swiss army in the place of cantonal levies.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 posed new threats to Swiss neutrality. While the German-speaking Swiss favored the Central Powers, the French- and Italian-speaking Swiss supported the Allies. An industrializing Switzerland depended for its very existence on continued trade with both the Allies and the Central Powers, as by 1914 foreign trade totaled 75 percent of GNP. Neutrality kept the country together, but as in the past, the Swiss had to convince each side that its neutrality would not benefit the other. The government assumed emergency powers and imposed a degree of press censorship in order to avoid antagonizing the belligerents. Nevertheless, divisions among

4. Interesting discussions of Swiss neutrality can be found in Edgar Bonjour, *Swiss Neutrality: its History and Meaning* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1946) and *La Neutralité Suisse: Synthèse de son Histoire*, 9 vols. (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1979); Georges-André Chevallaz, *Neutralité Suisse et Nations Unies* (Lausanne: Editions de l'Aire, 1986); J. R. de Salis, *Switzerland and Europe* (Oxford, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1971); Roland Ruffieux, *La Suisse de l'Entre-deux guerres* (Lausanne: Payot, 1975); Werner Rings, *La Suisse et la Guerre, 1933-1945* (Lausanne: Ex Libris, 1975).

5. In 1515, the Swiss Confederate armies were defeated by the forces of Francis I of France at the battle of Marignano. The Confederacy signed a treaty of "perpetual peace" with France in 1516 and a defense treaty in 1521. These events marked the end of Swiss expansionist ambitions in Europe.

6. Support of republican refugees drew threats of invasion from monarchist statesmen such as Metternich.

the Swiss were reinforced by the social and economic strains produced by the war. For example, while leftists sympathized with the revolutionaries in Germany and Russia, the right was intent on crushing the Bolshevik threat.

The threats faced during the war led Switzerland to join the newly created League of Nations, but only after the League Council exempted it from having to apply military sanctions. There was still opposition, however, and the decision to join would not have been possible without the vote of large majorities in the French-speaking cantons. In subsequent years a remarkable number of Swiss personalities played important roles in League endeavors, and Geneva became the League's headquarters. During Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the Swiss government reluctantly applied economic sanctions, although this was seemingly inconsistent with its neutral status. When collective security collapsed, it received permission from the League to return to a status of integral neutrality.

With the outbreak of war in September 1939, the Swiss Federal Council once again issued a declaration of neutrality. Following the invasion of the other European neutrals and the defeat of France in 1940, Switzerland found itself surrounded by the Axis Powers. The entire army mobilized. Pressure for accommodation to the "New Order" in Europe increased, both from within and without. On June 25, 1940, Federal Councillor Marcel Pilet-Golaz announced partial demobilization in a speech to the nation. He spoke vaguely and ominously of the necessity for Switzerland to abandon old habits and to play a new part in a Europe founded on new bases. However, the military resisted any attempts to abandon the policy of neutrality.

Though the Swiss resisted numerous German demands, there was bitter friction with the Allies. Out of sheer necessity the Swiss had to trade primarily with the Axis Powers. Winston Churchill recorded in December 1944 that he had to dissuade Stalin from a plan to send Western and Russian armies through Switzerland to catch German forces on the Rhine from behind. Churchill went on to write:

. . . of all the neutrals, Switzerland has the greatest right to distinction . . . What does it matter whether she has been able to give us the commercial advantages we desire, or has given too many to the Germans, to keep herself alive? She has been a democratic state, standing for freedom in self-defence among her mountains, and in thought, in spite of race, largely on our side.⁷

As the Swiss looked at the devastation that surrounded them at the end of the war, they were reinforced in their sense that neutrality was essential to the preservation of their fragile unity. The immediate question facing the Swiss government was to determine what its role would be in the postwar world, particularly its status in the recently established United Nations Organization. Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to Swiss President von Steiger in

7. Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, 6 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1953), vol. 6: *Triumph and Tragedy*, p. 712.

January 1945, that he "sympathized with the past difficulties of [his] position," and that he hoped "Switzerland [would] join with the victorious powers in building a new world organization for peace and prosperity."⁸

For Switzerland, creation of the UN raised once more the issue of the compatibility of Swiss neutrality with the concept of collective security embodied in the UN. The Federal Council took up the matter in a series of reports, concluding in a final one that Switzerland could not stand aside while a new world organization devoted to world peace took form. As in 1920, however, Swiss neutrality would have to be guaranteed if it were to join.

Swiss Foreign Minister Max Petitpierre, having followed the deliberations at the UN Conference in San Francisco, concluded that the attitudes of the delegates precluded such a guarantee. The French delegate, for example, declared that the obligations of membership were "incompatible with the status of neutrality."⁹ The UN Secretary General, Trygve Lie, declared that international organization and neutrality were on two different planes, between which there could be no contact.¹⁰ These attitudes led the Federal Council to decide against applying for membership. Instead, it outlined a three-fold postwar policy for Switzerland: (1) it would follow closely the work of the UN in New York; (2) it would apply for membership in the International Court of Justice and in the UN technical agencies; and (3) it would facilitate the installation of UN agencies on Swiss soil. Insofar as collective security was concerned, Petitpierre explained to the parliament in December 1945, that:

[A]s in the past, Switzerland is convinced — and this conviction is reinforced by the experience of the war that has just come to an end — that in maintaining its neutrality, it will render greater services than in participating in sanctions exercised against other countries.¹¹

SWITZERLAND AND THE UN

The alignment of Swiss foreign policy has been altered by changes in the international environment over the last forty years. Switzerland no longer has on its borders two hostile powers, France and Germany, between which Swiss sympathies are split. Instead, it exists in the midst of a Western Europe closely allied with the United States and in the halting process of achieving unity through a complex series of organizations. These countries face a relatively hostile socialist bloc, but the presence of nuclear weapons seems to have created a long term standoff in Europe and a subsequent decrease in tensions. Meanwhile, the UN as an organization is no longer the result of a wartime

8. Letter from Roosevelt to von Steiger, quoted in Edgar Bonjour, *Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität*, Band VII, Dokumente 1939-1945.

9. Jacqueline Belin, *La Suisse et les Nations Unies* (New York: Manhattan Publishing Co. for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1956), p. 75.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

11. *Ibid.*

alliance. It has come close to achieving a universality of membership, including even neutral countries such as Sweden, Finland and Austria. The latter called upon the permanent members of the UN Security Council to recognize its legally neutral status when it joined in 1955.

In 1959, Petitpierre noted that the tendency toward universality created a singular status for countries outside the organization. He believed that in the long run non-membership might lead to a weakening of Switzerland's international position. In 1965, the Swiss Federal Council suggested that the legislature reopen the issue of UN membership. Over the next fifteen years the Council produced a series of reports, culminating in 1981 in a proposal for a referendum on the issue of UN membership. This application was to be based on an acceptance of the obligations imposed by the UN Charter, subject to Switzerland's determination to maintain its armed neutrality. However, the need for further hearings and consultations delayed the referendum. The federal elections of 1984 caused another postponement as the government wanted to avoid involving the membership issue in the elections. Finally, twenty years after the issue was originally brought before the legislature, March 16, 1986, was chosen as the date for the referendum.

THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN

Basic political changes usually take place slowly in Switzerland while political parties and groups attempt to forge a consensus. In this case time seems to have worked against the government. Swiss public opinion about the UN has fluctuated in response to external events. Polls showed that the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 and the subsequent oil shock paralleled a low of 32 percent in support of UN membership, while the Israeli-Egyptian rapprochement saw a high of 60 percent support in 1979. By the time the campaign began in earnest in June 1985, support had dropped to 35 percent, with 38 percent opposed, and 27 percent undecided.¹² Some commentators felt that the public was tired of the issue. Moreover, the campaign coincided with a period of generalized disenchantment with the federal authorities. In 1977, 58 percent of a sample of Swiss voters expressed confidence in the government while 36 percent declared that they lacked confidence. By 1982, polls registered a sharp drop to 44 percent, and by 1986 to 38 percent. Clearly, the timing of the vote was not propitious.¹³

Of Switzerland's four major national political parties, three supported the referendum vote. These were the Swiss Socialist Party, the Radical Democrats, and the Christian Democrats, who had roughly equal strength in parliament. The Central Committee of the Swiss Socialist Party was unanimous in approving the membership proposal, and Foreign Minister Pierre Aubert was its spokesman. Significantly, however, fifteen cantonal sections of the Radical Democrats took issue with their national party and recommended a negative vote, as did twelve cantonal sections of the Christian Democrats. The major

12. Forschungszentrum, *Abstimmung vom 16. März*.

13. Polls taken by *Die Weltwoche* of Zurich, reported in *Journal de Geneve*, 15 February 1986.

party opposing the vote was the Swiss People's Party or the Democratic Union of the Center, which had roughly half the strength of each of the other parties. The lesser parties were fairly evenly split. Among them the small but influential Liberals, who tend to represent an intellectual and economic elite, campaigned against membership. The Communist Party, especially strong in Geneva, was in favor. So was the largely German-based Independents' Alliance, which normally functions as an opposition party. Swiss trade union alliances, employee organizations, charities, and student and feminist groups were all usually in favor, while business groupings made no recommendations on the national level.

There were three main issues in the campaign leading up to the UN membership referendum. The first involved the question of Swiss neutrality and how it would be affected by joining the UN. The second was the desirability of membership itself. The final issue addressed the concern that the government's eagerness to join the UN was a manifestation of its desire to augment its own power.

Neutrality

Neutrality and its compatibility with the obligations of UN membership was a key issue in the campaign. It was widely believed that the UN Charter would deprive Switzerland of its neutral status under international law. Of particular concern was Article 103 of the Charter which states: "In the event of a conflict between the obligations of the members of the United Nations under the present Charter and their obligations under any other international agreement, their obligations under the Charter shall prevail."

A primary focus of this debate was the question of sanctions. Proponents of membership acknowledged the problems inherent in this issue, but argued that compliance with economic sanctions was necessary in any case. This was due not only to Article 2 in Section 6 of the Charter, which imposes obligations on non-members, but also because of political considerations. The UN sanctions against Rhodesia were cited as an example of an international initiative that was supported by Switzerland. Military sanctions were dismissed as a non-issue, as the UN Security Council was regarded as incapable of agreeing on such a course of action.

Opponents of membership attacked this position on several fronts. They held that Charter obligations would limit Switzerland's freedom of choice in international issues. The UN interventions in Korea and the Congo were cited to suggest that military involvement was not impossible. Finally, they expressed the cynical view that UN membership would not enhance Switzerland's influence in world affairs, as only size or numbers bestow power in the UN.

Another question addressed in the neutrality debate was that of Switzerland's "services" as a neutral country. Supporters of membership argued that remaining outside the UN would diminish the scope for such activities. Sweden, Austria and Finland were also neutral, but UN membership had enhanced their roles as impartial agents on the world scene. The Swedish

ambassador to Switzerland at the time remarked in an October interview with the *Tribune de Geneve*, that “. . . for my country there is no contradiction between our status of neutrality and our activities in the UN . . . [T]he UN imposes no obligation.”

The opposition disagreed vehemently. They denied any similarity of status between Switzerland on the one hand, and Sweden, Austria and Finland on the other. Sweden had no provision for neutrality either in its constitution or in international law and the other two nations were too closely linked to Moscow to be truly neutral. Roger Gallopin, former President of the International Red Cross, summed up the opposition viewpoint in an interview also given to the *Tribune*. He denied that Switzerland was losing its international role. Instead, he argued, Switzerland was a country of “last recourse” and could act with more authority precisely because it remained outside the international arena.

Criticisms Of The UN

Supporters of UN membership tried to brush aside allegations of UN incompetence, irrelevance, and malevolence. Opponents bolstered their case, however, with an October 1985 report, summarized in the *Gazette de Lausanne* by Frenchman Maurice Bertrand of the UN Inspector General Corps. Bertrand wrote of the lack of coordination and the dispersion of effort, the masses of unreadable and unread reports, the failures in the central area of keeping the peace, and the concealment of a lack of results by constant restatement of boundless aims. Most critics continued to maintain that while the specialized agencies to which Switzerland belonged were useful, there would be few tangible benefits from joining the UN itself. They argued that voting power had negligible significance in comparison to the important negotiations carried out in the corridors, lobbies, and dining rooms of the UN, to which Switzerland had equal access. Opponents of membership also cited the frankness of the UN Secretary General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, who was quoted by Roger Germain in *La Nouvelliste du Valais* as saying that the UN was in danger of becoming a hovel full of quarrelers and drivellers.

Distrust Of The Government

The Swiss government's efforts to promote the referendum proposal triggered a serious controversy about the role of the Federal Council in domestic politics. Strong criticisms of its active involvement in the campaign were voiced by the press. “There was a time,” Monique Pichonnaz wrote in *La Nouvelliste du Valais*, “when the government stayed out of campaigns. It gave its information, nothing more. Certainly, each federal councillor expressed his position clearly within his party and tried to get party support. But he didn't descend in the arena.”

This argument appeared time and again with clear references to Rousseau's ideals. The role of the government is to frame the issue on which the sovereign should rule, and to provide it with information. It was alleged that by taking

part directly in the debate on membership, the government had overstepped its authority. Pichonnaz accused the government of doing so more frequently in the last fifteen years, with the intention of increasing its own power at the expense of regional autonomy and direct democracy. She cited the case of Jean-Pascal Delamuraz, head of the Military Department, who had addressed a letter on the subject of admission to the UN to Swiss officers, despite the political neutrality of the Swiss army.

Some disagreed that this was a new phenomenon. Eighty-eight-year-old historian Edgar Bonjour, an expert on Swiss neutrality, reflected that the current government campaign had not been as determined as Foreign Minister Motta's campaign to get Switzerland to join the League of Nations.¹⁴

The government's attempts to win over a majority led to a reevaluation of the issue. The principles of federalism and democracy became a main concern. When Foreign Minister Pierre Aubert spoke to the Society of Officers shortly before the vote, he was criticized by the press for not giving the opposition an opportunity to express its views, and for leaving no room for debate. Clearly, the government's actions themselves became a major issue.

ANALYSIS OF REFERENDUM RESULTS

On March 16, 1986, the Swiss went to the polls in record numbers to reject the government's request by a vote of 1,591,428 (75 percent) to 511,548 (24.3 percent).¹⁵ The University of Berne's Research Center on Swiss Politics conducted an intensive examination of the vote.¹⁶ The research indicated that regular voters opposed the government's proposal by a ratio of seven to three, revealing that the 20 percent who were occasional voters did not provide the margin of defeat. Furthermore, virtually every stratum of Swiss society voted in almost equal proportion against the proposal. Students, of whom only a small proportion voted, were the only social group to vote in favor, by a slim majority. Women and those with higher education were slightly less opposed than others. The highest degree of opposition came from workers and farmers, 97 percent of the latter being against membership. The national leaders of the Radicals and the Christian Democrats could not convince their regional counterparts to support membership. Consequently, two-thirds of their party members who voted were against the proposal. Moreover, 40 percent of these voters were not even sure where their national party stood. Nearly 80 percent of the Liberal Party members, on the other hand, knew their party's position and voted accordingly. The Socialist Party, in contrast, persuaded its followers to cast 54 percent of their votes in favor of joining. Eighty-six percent of voters without party affiliation voted against membership.

The oldest cantons that had joined together in 1291 to form the Swiss Confederation voted most strongly against the proposal. In the conservative Appenzell Innerrhodes (the only canton that has continued to deny women

14. Interview in *L'Hebdo*, 20 March 1986, p. 13.

15. Forschungszentrum, *Abstimmung vom 16 März 1986*.

16. *Ibid.*

the vote in cantonal elections), only 10 percent of voters supported entry into the UN. The newest canton of Jura, created in 1978, provided the highest cantonal vote in favor (40.2 percent).

Exit polls indicated that the major objections to membership were excessive costs with few benefits, and the concern to maintain the historic policy of neutrality.¹⁷ Supporters mentioned international cooperation, and the economic and political benefits of entry, as arguments in favor of membership.

CONCLUSIONS

The referendum revealed a widespread conservatism that was manifested in the attitude that the government should maintain the status quo when no real benefits from a change in policy are discernible. Although the international community has changed dramatically in the last century, the Swiss still see neutrality as the source of their well-being and unity. The fact that a highly educated population deeply committed to international cooperation holds the UN in such low esteem is a significant comment about the organization. However, a post-election survey revealed that in addition to seeing the UN as an ineffective organization, the people had rejected the proposal because of a general distrust of their government. Letters to the editors in most Swiss newspapers expressed this distrust by challenging the government's motives and suggesting that it was the Swiss diplomats and political parties wanting to increase their own power that motivated them to pursue UN membership.

In all countries, foreign policy and domestic politics are intertwined and often inseparable. Swiss neutrality has always been a direct consequence of the need to preserve an internal balance between contending factions, without which independence would frequently have been jeopardized. Similarly, the question of UN membership was fundamentally involved with the domestic issue of the balance between government authority and direct democracy.

Distrust of the government was not generated by the UN debate, but was rooted in Swiss political tradition. A majority of those who voted against joining the UN saw their vote as a logical continuation of their opposition to the government's increasing intrusion into local matters. The question of UN membership was used to send a message of skepticism and disapproval to the federal government, to defend local liberties, and to show that direct democracy was still a fundamental attribute of the Swiss political system.

17. *Ibid.*