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Confidence in the ability of self-determination

Dear Sir or Madam

With this letter on the occasion of August 1, (the Swiss national holiday) we, the Direct Democracy Association wish to highlight Switzerland's special cultural achievement of its unique social entity based on citizenship. Hundreds of years ago, the Swiss succeeded in forming self-organized free diverse communities, joining them together in a federal state, improving and refining it over centuries. Switzerland is the only country to date where the art of direct democracy in thinking, feeling and acting is fostered in a distinctive manner. This year, we will focus on a number of the fundamentals of our self-determined social organisms based on serving the public interest: Confidence in fellow citizens; the meaning of knowledge and ability; the courage to think independently and the culture of constructive dialog. In remembering these cultural achievements, we wish to strengthen the culture of self-determination and self-organization of free, equal citizens.

Confidence in fellow citizens

Self-organization is only possible when a fundamental confidence in fellow citizens exists, knowing that they are able and willing to think of and to further the public interest. Every individual is capable of this faculty of reason. This is why a free social organism must set out to foster and strengthen rationality. In the smallest possible entities i.e. non-centrally, this takes place more readily, because the individual can get a better grasp of their own environment, and is thereby more directly motivated to think and act in the interest of the common good and to recognize that interest. For the development of rationality, an atmosphere must be engendered by those responsible which allows the most possible thoughts related to the task at hand to take hold, be it in matters within an association, in co-operatives, in school communities, or in community meetings where citizens decide and vote on important matters. In this way, everyone maintains an interest in the welfare of the whole and wishes to find out what the views of fellow citizens are in order to make a decision themselves. When issues are made open to *all* for discussion, the will of the people can emerge. In Switzerland, we maintain that this

will which is formed within the entire citizenry serves the welfare of all better than decisions made by a small elite.

Self-governance as an alternative to handing our fate over to an elite

In the Swiss Federal Charter of 1291, it is made evident that it is possible for us, humans, to govern ourselves as equals on our own strengths rather than waiting submissively on authority i.e. 'those capable of making decisions', while relying on their protection. Naturally, the authors based the charter on the belief that we, as creatures of God, are reasonable and decisive citizens, with the ability to solve conflicts among ourselves without having to depend on the assistance of higher jurisdiction. Naturally, false judgements are sometimes made by citizens. After all, mistakes are a part of being human. However, we believe that an elite - whatever its nature - makes more mistakes because personal weaknesses like vanity, nervousness, and the hunger for power can be lived out, going unchecked. Secondly, the few citizens of an elite are easier to manipulate, bound as they are in a complexity of interdependencies. Thirdly, the few members of an elite are fundamentally less capable of seeing all aspects of the task at hand. Fourthly, an elite, in being responsible for 'everything at once' lacks both the time and the motivation to deal with the complexity of each of the tasks at hand.

The duty of officials to foster the will of the people

We need to ask ourselves how the logical solution of fostering the will of the people can be advanced. We need to remind those responsible in associations, communities and cantons, that fostering the will of the people must be their utmost priority. Right from the beginning of projects, they must convey controversial aspects openly and honestly in putting the interests of all sides up for discussion, rather than just taking these on board. We observe with concern, the widespread satisfaction officials have in furthering their personal views and interests within office. In our direct democracy, being voted into office means above all, the honorable but difficult task of helping to foster the will of the people and to further it, while setting aside one's own interests, in contrast to authoritarian-structured democracies. In view of the difficulty of this role, we wonder how our ministers can have so much time on their hands to travel worldwide, having their hand-shakes with other leaders filmed, speaking with them for a few minutes and feeling important. Normally, this work could be done by ambassadors located in these countries who are generally more familiar with the situation in the country to which they are assigned.

Civic society instead of leader-cult

The evident focus on a few people in political life further weakens the possibility to experience different views and outlooks on life. This makes it more difficult to get an overall picture of current affairs, while weighing up many different views. Furthermore, a

false impression exists, that our history is made by a chosen few and that being interested in, and taking part in the political process above all means speaking out for or against select individuals. This trend can be observed in the USA where it is lived out to excess. In becoming the focus of media attention for a while, those in political life develop an inflated sense of self-importance and self-preoccupation, which hardly serves being open to the spectrum of needs and interests of their constituents. Furthermore, the media often seeks out hard-line and often undifferentiated sound-bites. In doing this, it hinders the development of reason in us citizens, because the calm weighing up of issues is extremely limited. Additionally, they often focus on a subject when they know the most ardent of antagonists are available for comment. Reason is better served when it has more scope than being restricted to a simple good-and-evil model. Such aversions and intensifications hardly serve the cultivation of understanding for different points of view. This is why we should listen more to calm deliberation, demanding it in discussions and from the media, while supporting people who are capable of this. We are sure that a lot more citizens would take part in shaping our community, if they could count on being able to discuss matters calmly, rather than being at the mercy of derisive criticism and arrogance.

Freedom of speech rather than manipulation of emotions

We would like to focus on an additional weakening factor affecting the sound development of the will of the people. In political circles, expensive political consultants and organizations developers are being hired - even by political and school communities. They advise those responsible, how they can lead citizens to decide for or against a topic or how they can take it over themselves, using highly-sophisticated strategies. They use methods which they call professional, in using (i.e. misusing) sociological and psychological knowledge. These methods use images, music, situations and text to fire up the emotions of specific interest groups. For example, emotionally significant images like the swiss flag or the swiss mountains are twinned with content which is palmed off on citizens. Seminars are held inviting important interest groups in which it is attempted to bring so-called opinion leaders into line emotionally on particular views. Within a few hours, an atmosphere is engendered in which it is more comfortable to be of the same opinion as the authority in focus, for example, with professors. Goals are adopted and agreed as policy to which seminar participants are duty-bound to uphold. Free and unhindered opinion forming and decision making ceases. Such techniques, used in both seminars targeting lobbies and interest groups and in more widespread campaigns set out to arouse extreme emotional aversion to certain opinions. It is not without reason that we find that fellow citizens often have a very strong aversion to particular opinions, neither wanting to discuss these, nor being able to give reasons for their opinion. These 'advisors' work consciously to undermine the development of citizens opinions through

discussions and debates. This way, the education of the general will is being thwarted systematically, using modern methods. The necessary practice of developing the will of the people and the necessary interest in the life situation of others along with weighing up of various interests is disabled, and with it, self-determination in a community is made impossible. Furthermore, the focus on working on different target groups using images and emotions is an affront to mature citizens. It hinders paying attention to other thoughts and perspectives, which is vital for communal census and peaceful coexistence. The theories upon which these advisors base their work, despite their harmless terminology, belong to authoritarian concepts of the stupidity and incompetence of the masses. With such theories, rationality itself is weakened, reducing people to their emotions. It is our task to lessen the influence of these advisors, by obliging our officials to communicate honestly and openly, demanding verifiable arguments from them.

Focus on community life rather than entertainment for the masses

It appears that media professionals often have a similar derogatory view of the people. For the self-determination of citizens, it is important to serve the development of the will of the people by publishing the most aspects of an issue at hand possible. In this way, every citizen can make their own judgement, while becoming more competent in various aspects of life at the same time. When media in particular regions have a monopoly, characteristically, the type of media is even more significant. The media commonly reduces citizens to observers in their own lives, restricting the world to a stirring up of emotions. A self-determined life is neither made up of emotionally inflated, mostly expensive time-wasting with music, body-cult, computers, shopping, alcohol and drugs, nor is it made up of flaunted matadors in culture, sport and politics whose personal weaknesses, likes and dislikes are forced on citizens in order to weaken their intellectual and emotional faculties. Such topics are creeping into our citizens' conversations about real life.

We believe that an extensive public debate must be held on the duty of the media in relation to our self-determined community.

The EU - a system of unenlightened thinking

The EU provides us with a clear definition of where it all leads to, when our ability of reason and self-organization is denied. Citizens can not even vote on their own constitution. As in the middle ages, this is being determined by their leaders along with the agreement that further non-agreed changes can be made at any time by those in authority. When after the citizens of France and the Netherlands, the citizens of Ireland declared themselves unconvinced by this despotism, they were reviled. And the Irish government had to justify itself to the authorities for not having brought their 'subjects' into line, despite its modern methods of manipulation. Not wanting to place the power in the hands of the people, EU leaders thereby claim that their authority is justified in

furthering peace, providing protection from enemies and judicial security, claiming merciful wisdom as their justification for doing so. 700 years ago, aristocrats justified their suppression while going to war abroad in the same way as the EU countries are doing today. The swiss had the audacity in those times along with the cleverness and the courage to explain that they were sufficiently rational, capable of peace and able to protect themselves from attack. This seems to us to be meaningful for all peoples of europe. We think that, as swiss, we can also lead the way today, showing that it is not necessary to bend to the will of the so-called logic of power. Our culture of self-determination doesn't fit together with the authoritarian EU model of society, as long as we uphold our model of free agreements made by free people. That is why we as citizens can not submit to further EU decrees. Rather than leaving such crucial decisions to our administration, who currently reproduce these decrees here, it is high time we citizens ceased to allow these decisions to be taken out of our hands and learned a lot more about them to decide on them for ourselves.

Knowledge and ability – two fundamentals of an egalitarian culture

In a self-determined community, citizens challenge each other to deal with complex matters and reach a reasonable judgement on them together. Constantly weighing up current problems which need to be dealt with broadens our horizons. We learn to ask questions, develop our knowledge and cultivate our ability to deal with issues. The foundation is laid in school, which is why schools should serve to make us curious about many things, or to stay curious, and to form an opinion based on substantiated knowledge which can be disputed. This is why schools should not only prepare people for their working lives or for self realization, but to gain adequate knowledge in every area, so that we, as citizens can communicate with each other in a questioning, interested manner. It requires more ability than being able to use a computer and speak two foreign languages to be able to alter life for the better, above all when it comes to making other people happy and contributing to their well-being. In addition to this, we should ask ourselves, whether we think enough about how we use our skills and abilities for the benefit of all, rather than just the advancement of our own careers.

Courage to think, judge and act for ourselves

In a self-determined community it takes a lot of courage to think for oneself, and not to just go along with the opinions of the majority. But it also takes courage to admit to an error of judgement on our part, or to acknowledge that the other side of the argument is better, as it also requires courage to look for a road which can be taken by as many people as possible.

It takes a lot of courage to listen to many different opinions, to read and to weigh up arguments, without considering which slogans have been published by which groups. Without the will of every single person to form their own opinion on every factual issue,

fostering the will of the people suffers. When one no longer dares to think through an argument or one side of an issue and to talk about it because of the risk of creating an aversion to particular people or groups, self-determination becomes severely damaged, and those who create such tensions determine the decisions which are made. For example, it is astounding that teachers and students in universities need to avoid reading certain newspapers or expressing certain opinions, in the knowledge that if they do read them, they will be repudiated. In the interests of our self-determined culture, we need free discourse of thoughts, deliberations and opinions. While it is indisputable that tolerance should be demanded in the interests of outsiders, tolerance itself is necessary in the true liberal sense, i.e. for every mindset in society. We must find the courage to stand up against the defamation of those who think differently. An alarming example of such defamation was seen this year in Switzerland when a liberal party minister saw fit to declare that those who think differently are fascists, deliberately hindering the process of opinion-forming. We must speak out with all our courage on every level of the open discussion, where the facts are at the center of the discussion rather than a battle of hollow rhetoric, no matter what our own opinion is.

Constructive culture of dialogue

Self-determination in a community is only then possible when free and equal citizens are both willing and able to engage in dialogue with each other.

On the one hand, some institutionalized citizens rights lead to citizens discussing with each other, even when they don't know each other: When signatures are being gathered, borders are crossed and opinions discussed. In the regular referenda, the opportunity arises to discuss with others and to take part in the many self-governing bodies.

When new laws or changes to existing laws are proposed, all organizations and individual citizens are called upon in advance to comment on the suggested law change.

Constructive discussion takes place in dealing with problems which need to be solved.

Many years of this kind of experience means that many citizens are able to interest themselves in the opinions of others and to think about them, carefully and inquiringly engaging in the discussion in order to avoid snubbing them, giving them the chance to save face, often contemplating which solutions could be acceptable for everyone. Many citizens are not intent on defeating those whose opinions differ to their own. Instead, they disagree when the suggested solution doesn't seem appropriate. This is why it is customary to not undermine the genuineness of the other person, but to try to be fair to them and their concerns. In this way, consensus is strived for consistently. Many foreigners realize that in our companies, much more value is placed on consensus than in other countries. In our country it is not always about winning a majority and to quash everything which minorities have proposed because of simply being in the stronger position.

In our country it is the responsibility of the majority to facilitate the contributions of minorities, in dealing with their concerns constructively. They know that they may well, as individual citizens, find themselves in the minority position in the next issue which is to be agreed on three months later.

We have established, however, that this culture of discussion is not valued adequately anymore. Instead it is looked down upon. Some use the search for consensus to force their own interests without considering others and without considering the common good. We can not let this get so far that our assemblies dilapidate into places of repartee, instead of places where good solutions are sought in a genuine way. Our system appoints citizens as voluntary representatives who strive to serve the will of the people in assemblies. They have no mandate to distinguish themselves, to forge ranks and force interests in majority decisions of any kind in which only a fraction of our citizens rights are served as a spin-off effect. This type of parliamentarianism imported from our authoritarian neighbour countries is directly opposed to our self-determination. If our free citizens assemblies continue to dilapidate into gentlemen's agreements bodies formed out of alliances of mutual interests, as they are encouraged to do by political scientists, we as citizens must seek out other possibilities to foster the will of free and equal citizens for the common good.

Political parties – helpers or hinderers of self-rule?

Above all, our large political parties must strive again to become part of our direct democratic civic society. Political parties are by their very nature, foreign to the forging of agreements by free and equal citizens. This is why their being singled out in their significance for our state in the new constitution is amiss. (The new constitution came into being in 1999 without having been discussed by us citizens. In falsely claiming to merely modernize the language of the constitution, representatives abused the trust of the citizens who elected them.). Political parties can assume a meaningful role in our state by offering fora in which deliberation takes place on various factual issues. In order to attain this, political parties must be structured in a decentralized way in order to be open to different opinions. In recent months, all of the large parties in Switzerland have created and published a slogan, stating that no dissidents should exist in their ranks. If party members are to toe the party line on the party profile determined by consultants, these parties would no longer contribute to the culture of self-determination. Instead, they would become organs for the advancement of subserviency. Whoever sees opinions contrary to theirs as dissidence, is out to gain power and influence rather than to encourage the free dialogue of free citizens. It is dishonourable to expect from a free citizen to be of the same opinion as the party leadership or, if not, that they remain silent.

It is further food for thought that the political parties have been re-structured centrally, increasingly instructing the cantonal parties and local parties on what opinions to have. In practice, they show us what their concept of our self-determined social entity is. Clearly, they believe that central leadership with subservience is a concept for shaping the will of the people which guarantees success. If an assembly is to be a forum with the aim of deliberating various opinions, parties can not be allowed to direct their members as to how far they are allowed to think, based on their having to present a unified voice to the public. In this way, assemblies are being degraded to virtual battle grounds in which parties strive to distinguish themselves in preparation for the next election. We can no longer be a citizen state when we consistently hear and see nothing else but the statements of party leaders which often have nothing to do with the issue at hand. Such statements are the result of opinion polls based on these matters or are the result of agreements with other parties. Such agreements are the clear results of party leaders assuming that representatives voted into power by citizens serve the party first and citizens thereafter.

Differing opinions - the stamp of party approval

We condemn the tendency within parties to appoint a specialist for every issue who is the only person thereafter to provide information on the issue at hand. Other members have to keep silent. It is equally reprehensible when crises in parties are declared as soon as the opinion of the party leadership is not met with unanimous compliance. Such statements also display an authoritarian understanding of fostering the will of the people. This concept of political parties as monolithic fighter troupes battling against opponents, whose leaders control their subordinates is a danger to the free exchange of opinions. It forces participants to be constantly well-behaved, weeding out individuals from political life who want to tackle factual issues head on.

We must begin to measure the value of a political party in its providing a forum for the education of the will of the people and on how strong the deviations among the assembly members are in the casting of votes. We recommend the larger parties urgently, to leave behind the band of politmanagement consultants, whom they have all but sworn into office in Switzerland in an undemocratic manner. However, it is doubtful that they will change for the better. For this reason, we as citizens need to form fora in many areas in which open discussion on matters at hand in our communities can take place, in which we foster the much needed culture of dialogue.

Contribution to peaceful co-existence

The constructive culture of dialogue, in attempting to find reasonable solutions to problems at hand, is a constant practice and experience of the belief that peaceful co-existence is possible. In dealing with real problems it becomes clear, that life is not

simply black and white, that people are not merely good or bad, and that one is not restricted to either refusing something or casting one's lot in with one side of an argument. The more individuals take part in their community, the more humane their perspective on life becomes. As a result, direct democracy and self-governance cannot be limited to the terminology of institutions. Instead, it is a living breathing part of a social entity. Direct democracy and self-governance are the expression of a culture, altering that culture, strengthening trust in fellow citizens and in oneself. In doing this, it creates more bonds between citizens and entrusts individuals with more competence and more functions. Within the various institutions and roles it does not exist in and of itself, but must be filled by responsible individuals.

Sincerely,

Diethelm Raff
President

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(Translated by Joan Croker)