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Parliament's autumn session in Geneva

Spoilt for choice

Since the federal parliament first met in 1848, it has never sat outside Berne. Until this autumn. From September 20 to October 8 both houses met in Geneva.

Perhaps the much vaunted spirit of Geneva will serve to build bridges between the German-speaking and French-speaking cantons. The latter have not yet forgiven the German speakers for their No to the EEA on

Pierre-André Tschanz

December 6, 1992 – the French speakers having voted massively in favour. This spirit of Geneva should be used to cement the country together again and pour balm on the souls of the French speakers. Whether this has worked is for the future to tell. And even if it has not, parliament cannot be blamed for doing nothing to solve the problem.

Fattening members

The way to the heart is through the stomach. Special attention was given to this seduction technique in Geneva. Swiss parliamentarians were spoilt for choice – with lunches, drinks, cocktail parties, drinks at the opera (*Carmen* at the Grand Théâtre) and bucolic trips to the vineyards. Not all the invitations could be accepted, and this made the torture worse. One Auto Party member, Michael Dreher, came out with this selection criterion: “I go where the buffet is the most promising”. We never discovered whether he meant quantity or quality. And this is exactly what the German-language television journalists wanted to know when they asked three members to mount the scales before and after the session. This was also thought to be a highly scientific method of judging the political weight of the proceedings.

And one went to prison

One member did find a way of avoiding the whole problem of gastronomic stress. Andreas Gross, anti-militarist spokesman, was a good boy and went back to Zurich every night. Not home though, but to gaol. He was serving a 45-day half-prison sentence for refusal to carry out alternative civilian service. “They offered to let me do the nights in a Geneva prison”, he said; “but I refused. I don’t want privileges that other objectors don’t have”.

The spirit of Geneva

While digesting and recovering, members were treated to a reduced workload with some international debates – GATT, European policy, etc. Although these subjects let them appeal to the spir-



National Council President Paul Schmidhalter blesses the wine harvest in Canton Vaud. (Photo: Keystone)

it of Geneva, the parliamentarians concluded that it was not the moment to discuss Switzerland’s relations with the European Community. They did not want to steal a march on the government – which would have had to state a clear point of view. And this was despite the fact that a few days previously they had expressed a desire to defuse the tension caused by the EEA No vote. They then showed their devotion to Swiss cultural unity by adopting a language article formulated so vaguely that nobody could

possibly feel offended, but which might just put a stop to the decline of the Romansh language. And on the subject of healing wounds the national councilors decided to put sickness insurance funds on a sound footing.

The Berne restorers made happy

Drawing the balance of the Geneva session, we may say that everybody – or almost – was able to cash in. Parliamentarians were able to limit their personal expenses. Geneva hotel owners saw a healthy rise in overnight stays – not to be underestimated in a recession. Companies in Geneva and its surroundings made new friends. And, last but not least, the restorers (not the restaurant owners) of the National Council Hall in Berne were able to get on with their work undisturbed. (Ah yes, I forgot to mention that the renovation work also played its part in the decision to move to Geneva. Some members had become very worried about structural problems. An Aargau Free Democrat had seen the famous fountain, Geneva’s mascot, in the bottom of his beer glass. And this gave him the idea of suggesting holding the session in Geneva).

The only people with cause for complaint were Berne’s hoteliers, and especially mine host at the Café Fédéral opposite parliament, whose takings were well down on other autumns. But that interested the burghers of Geneva not a whit. ■