

Swiss reflections on the British referendum

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Meeting British expatriates in the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club, we still can make out the shock about the recent verdict for Brexit. During the past many weeks in Hong Kong, Singapore, Mumbai and Tokyo the main topic of discussion had been the British referendum about the question whether or not to stay in the European Union. Most of the interlocutors were confident that the British would reject Brexit.

A well-known anglophile Hong Konger opined: „In the end the British, like the Chinese und unlike the continental Europeans, are a pragmatic people of traders that will certainly think twice before plunging itself into an adventure with unforeseeable consequences“. We recall the days of Margaret Thatcher, when the „iron lady“ regularly trailed in opinions polls, but came out victorious at every general election she led her party. We recall a conversation with Mrs. Thatcher, when she was leader of the opposition. Talking about negative opinion polls, she categorically stated “I don't want to be liked, I want to be respected”.

However, things turned out unexpectedly on the memorable June 23rd, 2016. There are numerous analyses about the motives behind the British vote to leave Europe. As a Swiss in Asia one is often asked about the functioning of our system of frequent and multiple referenda. Brexit has made one aware that direct democracy does not fall from the sky but has to be learnt and lived over generations. If citizens who once in a lifetime are called to vote in a referendum, make completely unexpected decisions, one should not be surprised.

The motives behind the decision in favor of brexit are very complex. Many British simply had enough of continental Europe, many complained about too many foreigners settling on their islands, others were eager to punish the Conservative government and some may simply have wanted to replace David Cameron with Boris Johnson. In Switzerland, too, there are multiple reasons that explain why a vote goes into a certain direction, but in general one can say that sound reasoning wins out over short term emotions.

We recall a discussion with Chinese students about the Swiss democracy. One of them asked whether the Swiss could vote on any issue. When told yes, he wondered whether the Swiss still pay taxes. In his opinion, if the Chinese could vote on everything, they would abolish the state, the army and the taxes. In the same vein Asian media commented with astonishment and approval that the Swiss some months ago had soundly rejected an initiative to introduce a guaranteed minimum income for everyone.

Whenever in other countries there are ideas about a referendum the focus is on Switzerland. It gets mostly forgotten that at issue is not only the actual vote in the polling station, but that direct democracy can only flourish in a politically sound and sophisticated environment. Looking from afar one sometimes has the impression that even the Swiss themselves take their direct democracy as something that is given for all times and forget how carefully it has to be nurtured to function well and not to lead to precarious decisions that block one's own future.

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