



The Parliament Building in Bern, Switzerland

English









Curia Confoederationis Helveticae

‘Curia Confoederationis Helveticae’, the building that houses the Swiss parliament, was erected between 1894 and 1902. It was designed by Hans Wilhelm Auer, an architect from St. Gallen. 173 Swiss firms were involved in its construction and 33 Swiss artists were commissioned to decorate it. Ninety-five per cent of the stone used was quarried in Switzerland and the variety of materials employed is symbolic of the country’s diversity. Each statue and painting represents a particular moment in Switzerland’s history.

The north façade: The three statues created by the sculptor Rodo von Niederhäusern from the canton of Vaud represent political independence in the centre, the executive on the left and the legislature on the right. The two griffins, created by Anselmo Laurenti from Ticino, symbolise strength and intelligence. The keystones above the doors, designed by Maurice Hippolyte Reymond from Geneva, symbolise courage, wisdom and strength. In the left-hand niche is an allegory of freedom, represented by a broken chain, while the right-hand niche houses an allegory of peace with an olive branch and a sheathed sword; both are the work of James André Vibert (also from Geneva). Finally, the two bronze figures created by Maurice Hippolyte Reymond represent the chronicler of the past on the left, and the chronicler of the present on the right.

Domed hall

This part of the building can be considered a monument to Switzerland. The layout takes the form of a cross, reflecting the Swiss flag. The staircase leading up from the main entrance leads to a group of statues known as the '**Three Confederates**' by James André Vibert from Geneva, together weighing 24 tonnes. According to legend, the three Confederates – Walter Fürst from Uri, Werner Stauffacher from Schwyz and Arnold von Melchtal from Unterwalden – founded the Confederation in 1291 by swearing the oath on the Rütli. The **four mercenaries** on the balustrades form the guard of honour of the three Confederates and are also by James André Vibert. The mercenaries represent the country's four national languages: German (about 60 %), French (about 20 %), Italian (about 8 %) and Romansh (about 0.5 %).

On the north wall of the domed hall there are two niches housing statues created by Hugo Siegwart, a sculptor from Lucerne: on the left, the legendary **Arnold Winkelried**, the hero (historically unsubstantiated) of the battle of Sempach (1386), symbolising sacrifice, and on the right, **Niklaus von Flüe**, co-author of the Treaty of Stans (1481), symbolising reconciliation. The classical **loggia of honour** between the two niches is purely decorative. Above the loggia is a **plaster relief** by Adolf Meyer from Basel of a scene from Friedrich Schiller's drama 'William Tell' depicting the arrival of our forebears in Switzerland. The image is meant to show that the Swiss people derive from different ethnic groups.





The four large arched windows just beneath the dome are decorated with works by four Swiss artists. The paintings on glass depict scenes from the four main industries in Switzerland in 1902: the **east** window, by Albert Welti from Zurich, depicts the textile industry around Lake Zurich, the **north** window, designed by Emile-David Turrian from Vaud, depicts the Rhine and the theme of trade and transport, the **west** window by Ernest Biéler, also from Vaud, illustrates the metal industry in the Jura mountains, and the **south** window, which is the work of Hans Sandreuter from Basel, shows an agricultural scene with the Jungfrau Massif (Bernese Oberland) in the background.

The **Swiss Cross**: A mosaic from the studio of the Neuchâtel-based English artist Clement Heaton decorates the apex of the glass dome. The banners illustrate, in Latin, the philosophy of the Swiss political system: Unus pro omnibus – Omnes pro uno (One for all – All for one). The two female figures represent freedom. The Swiss Cross is surrounded by the **coats of arms of 22 Swiss cantons** painted on glass by Albert Lüthi (Zurich). The coat of arms of the canton of **Jura**, created in 1978, was placed in the arch above the 'Three Confederates'.

The Swiss Parliament consists of two chambers of equal status: the **Council of States** with 46 members who represent the cantons (two members per canton and one for each of the former half-cantons), and the **National Council** with 200 members who represent the Swiss population (in proportion to the number of inhabitants of the respective canton). The members of both chambers are elected by the Swiss electorate for a term of office of four years (legislative period). They draw up the laws of the land, although the electorate

always has the final say through the Swiss system of referendums and popular initiatives.

The **federal government** consists of seven federal councillors, normally drawn from the four largest political parties. Although such a coalition requires continuous mutual consideration and compromises, it is also the key to Switzerland's political stability. There is no hierarchy among the members of the Federal Council; each heads a federal department (ministry). Federal councillors are elected by the **United Federal Assembly** (joint session of the National Council and the Council of States) for a four-year term. Every year in December the United Federal Assembly elects one member of the Federal Council as president. He or she then serves as 'primus inter pares' (first among equals) for that year and chairs the cabinet's weekly meetings and assumes representative duties in Switzerland and abroad.





The Council of States chamber

The **fresco**, by Albert Welti from Zurich and Wilhelm Balmer from Basel, depicts an 18th century people's assembly. As a model Albert Welti chose the traditional 'Landsgemeinde'-ring in Stans (canton of Nidwalden), the surrounding countryside is that of Sarnen (canton of Obwalden). This type of open-air assembly was the original form of direct democracy in Switzerland. It was always held in the open air and exists today only in the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus. For this work, the two artists painted portraits of people from the cantons of Obwalden and Nidwalden and later incorporated them in the fresco in Bern. The massive **wrought-iron chandelier** created by Ludwig Schnyder von Wartensee of Lucerne has 208 bulbs and weighs 1.5 tonnes. It was extremely modern and luxurious in its day (1902) as it used electricity right from the start. The three high-arched windows feature embroidered curtains from St. Gallen. The **dates in gold** between the arches refer to important milestones in the history of the Swiss constitution. A plaque listing the events to which they refer can be found by the doors of the portal.

The National Council chamber

The **mural** by Charles Giron from Geneva, entitled 'The Cradle of the Confederation', shows a magnificent view over Lake Lucerne: the **Rütli Meadow** can be seen in the foreground. This is where the three Confederates took their oath in 1291 and founded the original Swiss Confederation. (Switzerland has existed in its present form since 1848.) The twin peaks of the Mythen can be seen in the background, along with the small town of Schwyz. The **angel of peace** is reclining in a cloud above the Rütli with an olive branch in her hand. In the niche to the left of the painting is a statue by Antonio Chiat-tone from Ticino representing the Swiss national hero **William Tell**, a symbol of political freedom and action. In the niche to the right stands the statue of **Gertrud Stauffacher** by Antonio's brother Giuseppe Chiat-tone, representing wisdom. According to legend, it was she who suggested that the three valley cantons Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden should form a Confederation by swearing an oath ('William Tell' by Friedrich Schiller). Gertrud was the wife of one of the three Confede-rates, Werner Stauffacher. Above the painting and running round the entire chamber is a frieze featuring the coats of arms of 59 important towns and cities in 1902, showing that the smallest political units, the communes, are also represented.

The National Council chamber is where the **United Federal Assembly** meets (joint session of both chambers), the body that elects the members of the government (the federal councillors), the judges who sit in the federal courts, the





Federal Chancellor and – in the event of war – a general to head the armed forces. Along the rear wall are the 44 seats provided for the representatives of the Council of States. The members sit in pairs under the coat of arms of their respective canton. The backrests were decorated with carvings of native flora and fauna by the German artist Ferdinand Huttenlocher. Two seats were added on the west side of the chamber under the diplomats' gallery for the members representing the canton of **Jura** after it has been founded in 1978. A bronze relief entitled 'The Awakening of a People' by Camillo Huber is mounted above the two seats.

Lobby

The **lobby** is 44m long and its curved shape lends it great depth. This is where Council members meet and talk during the sessions, as well as give interviews and receive lobbyists. It also serves as a reception hall; it is here that the Federal Council receives heads of state on official visits and where the President of the Swiss Confederation holds the traditional New Year's reception for foreign ambassadors. The **ceiling paintings** are the work of Antonio Barzaghi-Cattaneo from Ticino. The centre row of cartouches shows the six most important national virtues: truth, wisdom, patriotism, prosperity, charity and justice. The paintings on the inner and outer walls depict the most important branches of trade and industry of the day: on the inner curve, ironwork, shoe-making, tourism, baking and construction, and on the outer curve, the natural sciences, the arts, education, agriculture and the watch and musical box industry.





www.parlament.ch
parlamentsbesuche@parl.admin.ch
+41 58 322 90 22

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Flash photography and filming
are not permitted during the tour.

