

Conférence Monsieur Alain Berset, Président de la Confédération

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Introduction Marie-Laure Salles

Monsieur le Président de la Confédération, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur et représentant permanent de la Suisse à Genève, Madame la Maire de la Ville de Genève, Monsieur le Président de la Fondation pour Genève, dear students, dear colleagues, your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends of the Institute, it is my pleasure and privilege to welcome you tonight for what is effectively the Opening Keynote Lecture of the spring semester at the Institute.

The Geneva Graduate Institute was historically the first school of its kind. While most schools of international affairs in existence today have emerged through the 2nd half of the last century as offshoots of national schools of public policy, the Geneva Institute was born, in 1927, “global by design” as we could say today. As many of you know, our founder, William Rappard, an exceptional Swiss-American man, was instrumental in convincing, at the end of world war I, the American President Thomas Woodrow Wilson to bring the League of Nations to Geneva and Switzerland. Rappard played a key role in the dynamics of the League and of early multilateralism. He was convinced that, and here I quote him quoting the British political scientist Graham Wallas, “*the consciousness of a common purpose in mankind, or even the acknowledgment that such a common purpose is possible, would alter the face of world-politics at once*”. With such a conviction, it is therefore not surprising that he rapidly realized in the early 1920s that there was a need to accelerate the spread and solidification of such a consciousness of common purpose – and that education was a key lever for this. The creation of the Institute was for him a mechanism of transnational community building – a community that would be bound by a project and a purpose and by the conviction that peace required international collaboration and rule-making.

Let me now quote Rappard directly, from his 1931 book, the Geneva experiment:

The fact that thanks to the league of nations there are today in almost all states of the world influential officials, eminent lawyers, universally respected scholars and experts of all kinds who have made friends with their opposite numbers abroad may well in times of international crises prove to be a far more useful buttress against war than any technical treaty which they may have drawn together.

Hence, like Obelix, the Geneva Institute fell into the magic transnational potion from the start... but the reason why we fell into it so fast and so deeply was precisely because we were born right here, in Geneva, in Switzerland... we are international in large part because we are also Swiss and Genevois... like some of our neighboring organizations, particularly the one on the hill after the place des nations, we are deeply connected to the mysterious *Esprit de Geneve* – which I would like to propose here has been for many decades and remains today a strong asset of Swiss diplomacy and foreign policy.

Being a french national still recently arrived here, it may appear somewhat presumptuous for me to try and provide a definition of this esprit de geneve. But i will try nevertheless. Here are some of the key defining and structuring dimensions i would like to suggest:

1. First the Esprit de Genève is characterized by the ability to leverage and transform power into leadership for the common good
2. A second feature of the Esprit de Genève is courage as a principle of action. Courage is not recklessness but “fermeté réfléchie” – thoughtful firmness. Or when informed conviction becomes firm action.
3. A third element is certainly humanism – putting the human (and we should add today its biotope, our earth) at the center. Humanism in the Esprit de Genève translates very directly into empathy, listening, bridging and humility – all important mechanisms of Swiss diplomacy more broadly understood...
4. To summarize this esprit de genève in one sentence, i like to use this quote by albert thomas who was the first director of the international labour organization:
“ne jamais renoncer à une cause humaine aussi difficile soit-elle”!

There is a notion in political science that is very telling and powerful – the notion of grounded cosmopolitan... we have entered a cycle where once again the notion of cosmopolitanism is being decried – but let us be clear this is what the institute is indeed, a grounded cosmopolitan entity... I would even argue that this is also a good definition of International Geneva. And let me add that this combination of being strongly anchored and willfully open and connected, in a spirit of collaboration and co-construction is exactly what humanity needs to survive, what every single one of us needs to ensure our well-being and that of our children and grand-children.

Some of you will think that this is somewhat of a long introduction... promise, I am stopping here but it seemed important to remind us all of where the Institute comes from, as a background to understand why it makes so much sense to welcome today the president of the Swiss confederation – and to listen to him talk to us about “*quel rôle pour la Suisse dans un monde en crise*”. I will not try to convince you that our world is in crisis... I am doing that too often those days and I would rather listen to Monsieur Berset’s version of this. Let me just tell you at this stage, that after the presentation by the president, we will start the Q&A session with questions prepared by two of our students, whom I will introduce then.

Monsieur le Président de la Confédération, je ne suis pas sûre qu’il soit vraiment nécessaire de vous présenter ici. Il me semble important quand même de mentionner à nos étudiants qui ne le savent peut-être pas que vous êtes à la fois un politologue et un économiste, avec un doctorat en sciences économiques de l’Université de Neuchâtel. En cherchant sur internet le titre de votre thèse, que je n’ai d’ailleurs pas trouvé, je suis tombée sur quelques commentaires de vos anciens professeurs – ils vous décrivent comme et je les cite « *calme, décidé, motivé, bien organisé, rapide, vous fixant des objectifs et les atteignant, sérieux, intelligent, loyal, aimant approfondir les sujets...* »... comme ils le résument en d’autres termes avec un clin d’œil à Robert Musil « *l’homme sans défauts* » avec juste une pointe de regret lorsqu’ils ajoutent que vous avez été « *trop vite happé par la politique... et que c’est dommage pour le monde universitaire et de la recherche* ». Car en effet des 2003, avant même la fin de votre thèse vous êtes élu pour le Canton de Fribourg au Conseil des Etats. C’est en 2011 que vous êtes élu au Conseil Fédéral et vous êtes depuis 2012 en charge du Département Fédéral de l’Intérieur. A ce titre, vous avez été

en première ligne pour la gestion de la crise Covid, nous nous en souvenons toutes et tous... le premier janvier dernier vous avez commencé votre année de présidence de la confédération, la deuxième depuis 2011.

Monsieur Berset, nous nous réjouissons de vous entendre, un grand merci que j'exprime au nom de nous toutes et tous pour votre temps et votre présence aujourd'hui. Je vous laisse la parole !