

The decision of 1878

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The rivalry over the capital repeatedly turned violent. In 1870 a conflict over the choice of the chief town was one of the occasions on which the Confederation intervened in Ticino to restore order.¹ The conservative majority that took power in 1875 made a permanent capital part of its programme of reforms, together with the secret ballot, the popular initiative and referendum, and the construction of railways. The DSS biography of Gioachimo Respini, the leader of the conservative party, counts the establishment of Bellinzona as permanent capital among the achievements of that government.²

On 10 February 1878 the Grand Council voted by 63 to 35 for a constitutional amendment, and on 10 March 1878 the voters approved it by 13,819 votes to 6,851. The amended text read: "Il Gran Consiglio ed il Consiglio di Stato risiederanno stabilmente nella città di Bellinzona". The town of Bellinzona undertook to adapt and maintain the Palazzo governativo at its own expense. The other two towns received institutional compensation. Lugano became the seat of the Court of Appeal, the highest cantonal court, and Locarno received a court for the upper part of the canton. The government held its first session in its permanent seat on 14 March 1881, after Locarno's last six-year term had ended.³

Common misconception. Lugano is often described, especially abroad, as the capital of Ticino. It is not. The capital is Bellinzona, which Article 5 of the cantonal constitution of 14 December 1997 names as the seat of the Grand Council and the Council of State.⁴ Lugano is the largest town, the economic and financial centre and, since 1881, the seat of the cantonal Court of Appeal. The separation between the political capital and the financial centre is not unusual in Switzerland, where Bern is the federal city and Zurich the financial capital. In Ticino it is the result of the compromise of 1878 and of the rotation that preceded it.

1 The polycentric canton and its financial centre

The settlement of 1878 left a lasting imprint on the geography of public and private institutions in Ticino. The government, the parliament and most cantonal departments are in Bellinzona, which in 2004 also became the seat of the Federal Criminal Court, described in Chapter J.II. The Court of Appeal sits in Lugano, where most banks, fiduciary companies, law firms and the Università della Svizzera italiana are located. For the practitioner the result is a canton in which the political and judicial authorities that matter to a bank or a fiduciary are spread over several towns. The rotation of the nineteenth century has become a division of functions.

2 Notes

1. Hans-Urs Wili, "Interventions fédérales", DHS, version of 21 February 2018, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/026427/2018-02-21/>. ↩
2. Christian Luchessa, "Respini, Gioachimo", DHS, version of 11 November 2024, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/003535/2024-11-11/>. ↩
3. Mondada, "Bellinzona" (above). ↩
4. Costituzione della Repubblica e Cantone Ticino of 14 December 1997, RL 101.000, <https://www.lexfind.ch/tolv/208981/it>. ↩

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