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# Zoll, Douane, Dogane

**Urs Christen & Adrian Hill**

**May 2018**

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## Zoll, Douane, Dogane

There is a debate in Britain about whether you need some form of customs union with the European Union after you leave. We Swiss tend to find it's more sensible to take charge of our own trade rules and make our own trade arrangements as we have done recently with China. Perhaps I can dispel any lingering confusion over how we do things. Until recently I was Deputy Head of the International Affairs Department of the Swiss Federal Customs Administration. Beforehand I had spent many years working in different branches of the Customs service including the aftermath of the December 1992 referendum on EEA membership. Rejecting EEA membership was not a major problem for the Customs because we simply continued our normal service. Swiss borders are a customs task except for some airports.

Switzerland is the main crossroads of Europe. There are eight million of us speaking four languages – Schweizerdeutsch, French, Italian and Romansch, the last living dialect of Latin. A quarter of those eight million are foreign residents. We are a confederation, our cantons divulge power to the Federal Government. Surrounding us are at least two-hundred million Germans, French, Italians and Austrians. Every day over seven-hundred-and-fifty-thousand people cross our frontiers as do twenty-thousand trucks, three-hundred-and-fifty-thousand cars, hundreds of trains and aircraft. Every year twenty-two-million people cross the Swiss frontier. Our present modernisation programme runs until 2026 and is designed to cope with dramatic modernisation such as artificial intelligence, goods transport by drones, 3D printers and driverless cars that will all rapidly and permanently change the economy and society in the coming years. This poses major challenges for the FCA and all the other players. To keep up with all this traffic we constantly modernise our systems for clearing consignments. These are now completely electronic and these days the customs are recruiting IT people and accountants. We are urged to regard ourselves as a helpful service to business and industry. Twenty-two million declarations are made for export goods and seven million each year for import goods.

A very small amount of road freight is physically controlled and such controls are carried out well away from the border. Random controls are sometimes carried out at small border crossings but the vast majority are at the usual place of delivery. Large to medium sized companies have a system whereby they can file electronic clearance forms for the whole month. The system is easy for small traders. Containers already controlled at Rotterdam for transit, for example, rarely require another check in Switzerland. Much of the freight that passes through Switzerland is on its way from one EU country to another.

There are Customs offices all over the country. These days small border posts are closed at night but clearance forms are available and invoices sent within two days. The deterrent against people taking a chance and driving past the Customs is random checks – if caught the fine makes the booze taste less good and besides, most people are honest. Random checks are often the result of tip offs or specific information. If you are sending a consignment to Switzerland don't forget that we are a country of twenty-six cantons and they have the odd local public holiday when even the customs get a day off!

A huge amount of freight entering Switzerland for import or transit comes by rail and we encourage this trend, constantly improving the railways. The new Gotthard Rail Tunnel has greatly speeded rail freight crossing the Alps. This freight varies from rolled steel joists to cars to containers. The Customs also established focal points to deal with this traffic. A good example is the focal point at Aarau, roughly equidistant from Bern, Basel and Zurich. Trains deliver cars to a customs and auto traders centre alongside the Basel autobahn junction on the Bern, Zurich autobahn. Our electronic clearance system makes focal points very attractive and business and industry find them very convenient. From the point of view of the Swiss Customs a good rail system makes possible an integrated transport system for most freight. Combine this with our electronic clearance system and the whole structure becomes very efficient. We have found that customs revenue rises every year.

Switzerland has free ports such as Zurich and Geneva where goods can be held and viewed, art and precious stones for example, including goods sent for valuation. This system is popular with art dealers and duty is only paid when an item is sold and imported. Fintech is a new area and the Swiss are conscious of the anxiety of their neighbours about tax evasion. Large amounts of cash over a new limit of ten-thousand francs must be declared at the frontier.

There is very good liaison with the British HMRC at both senior and expert level. A similar electronic clearance system would work as well for the Channel Ports and the Northern Ireland border. The Channel ports are in the same league as Basel for traffic but the border across Ireland experiences very minor traffic volumes for an electronic clearance system. The customs officers on both sides of the Channel and those working either side of the north/south border in Ireland will have no other interest save smooth cooperation. We have very good cooperation with our neighbour customs services in four EU countries. In the case of Ireland, North and South, there are already VAT and currency differences and veterinary checks. A way of avoiding needless delays is to establish focal points and make some of them free ports. Adrian Hill mentioned to me that the Tees community in North-East of England was all for doing this to encourage industry and shipping. Possibly the docks at Belfast could become a free port and freight go straight there as a major focal point and transit centre. That would make freight going via Great Britain to the EU simply consignments passing through the free port as a focal point. For ordinary people, he tells me, there has been a Common Travel Area since the early 1920s and that simply continues after Brexit.

Air freight requires more care because the cargoes are world wide and often valuable. That system is hardly impacted by our relationship with the EU because most air freight is consigned on trans-continental flights.

On behalf of all Swiss, may I end with a request – when you take down the signs at ports and airports for EU passenger arrivals please could you leave a special lane for the Swiss...we love visiting the British Isles!

## A Note on Recent Media Coverage about Geneva

My knowledge of Geneva and the customs posts around the city, leaves me with the impression that a French businessman interviewed by a British journalist was almost trying to blame the Swiss customs for the traffic and the geography that makes entering and leaving Geneva so time consuming. I speak from hard gained experience – our son lives in the centre of the city and our daughter used to live in Carouge, a popular suburb south of the city centre.

Geneva is surrounded to north, west and south by France, to the east by Lac Lemman. On the north are the Jura Mountains and to the south a long low mountain called La Saleve. The River Rhone escapes from the lake through the city and from Switzerland through a gap between these low mountains. The only way into Geneva is along either side of the lake or round either side of La Saleve. The road along the south shore of the lake is a normal main road. There are small border crossings north of the city near CERN and the airport but these serve local convenience as the roads go to villages squashed between the lake and the Jura though just within Switzerland.

The most recent figures that I have seen are for 2016 when 104,000 plus workers came in every day from France. These are only the non-Swiss but represent 31% of the city work force. None-the-less they make twice as many road journeys in a day than the border of Northern Ireland sees in a year. One has to ask oneself why these worshippers of the Great Goddess Europa are so incredibly dishonest. Are they selling pure crap? Have they just got used to it? Most likely, yes. Many young Swiss couples buy a house in France where it's more affordable and commute into Geneva by car or bus or bike. Ferney-Voltaire is typical with an excellent branch of Carrefour, so popular that it comes up instantly on Swiss Google – the traffic goes both ways on Saturday. Drivers simply call out Carrefour and are waved through whether coming or going. The autoroute along the north shore of the lake also has to serve the airport. There is always a traffic jam along the lake shore from the moment you pass the airport junction. It was quicker to carry on past the airport and drive right round the city almost to the customs before France then turn north back into town when visiting our daughter and family in Carouge. That includes days when the main football stadium is packed for a match. We have even done the same to visit our son who lives three-hundred yards from the south shore of the lake near the cathedral and old city.

The French businessman sent employees over the border to install his own manufactured iron stairs and ornate gates. The employer would be asked to satisfy the cantonal and federal employment authorities and sometimes the trade unions that foreign labour is not being used to undercut their rates of pay. This is a very sensitive political matter in Switzerland where there has been a peace agreement between management and labour since 1937. The European Union with its badgering for free movement of people and labour is regarded as a threat to this deal. I checked with the federal labour office here in Bern before a small company from Sussex put in a bid to replace old clay tennis courts with new artificial ones for the local tennis club. I didn't want Garry and Centre Court Services stopped at the customs with huge rolls of artificial grass! The federal office was very helpful and I understood what had to be done within minutes.

As for the other routes into Switzerland there are sometimes delays at Basel when drivers have forgotten to buy an autobahn sticker. All vehicles require a windscreen sticker to drive on the

motorway system. The government wanted to double the price but the people voted no – I'm a great fan of direct democracy. Most of the smaller posts are open just a few hours a day but everything you need to know is on the Federal Customs Administration website. I was once stopped at the frontier north of Shaffhausen, by the young German customs officers, who wanted to search me and my car *before I left* Germany. Wondering what was the problem, the older and wiser Swiss customs officer strolled into Germany and asked me the reason for my visit. To see my Mother-in-Law I replied in Schweizerdeutsch. There is no more important word in a Swiss male's vocabulary. I was told to jump in my car and get going so I was on time!

## About the Authors



Urs Christen was born in 1957 and comes from Bern.

He joined the Swiss Customs aged 20, and has served in Geneva, Basel and at the HQ in Bern.

His work has seen him take part in many international talks.



Adrian Hill is a former soldier who then pursued a career with Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service for almost 30 years.

Following retirement he became an author, then Chief Executive of a major industry association and Member of the CBI Council, before he retired again.

He subsequently took the London Tourist Board examinations as a tour guide and later became a member of the Institute of Tourist Guiding. He is the founder of British Sky Tours - <http://www.britishskytours.com/> Adrian is married with two grown children

*The cover image is of a paraglider who has just taken off from La Saleve, the large hill that walls in Geneva from the south.*

*The photo is taken standing on a hill that's in France. The border is out of sight down in the valley and more of France can be seen south of the Jura where CERN sprawls below the hills. Thus Geneva is completely closed in on three sides.*

