

Spring 2006 – Meeting of the Council of the Swiss living abroad

This year our meeting was quite extraordinary. We had the honor to hold our gathering at the Nationalratssaal in the Federal Parliament building. Each member was given a small flag to put on their little desk, probably the first and only occasion the Singapore flag was shown in the premises.... The reason for this special treat was that we were finally able to reach our goal of having more than 100.000 registered voters from abroad. Exactly 105.212 Swiss take part in elections and vote from their homes all over the globe. This is equivalent of the political power of the city of Basel or the canton of Neuchatel.

The first part of our meeting therefore was kind of a celebration with many interesting guest speakers like representatives from the big four ruling parties, the president of the parliamentarian group "Auslandschweizer" and two members of our Council. It seems that the Swiss living far away from their home land are even more interested in the political scene as their participation in votes is much higher than in Switzerland itself – more than 60% take part which can have a huge impact specially if an election result is around 50/50 yes or no.

In an interesting talk Mr. Longchamp from the gfs institute in Berne told us some facts and figures about the Swiss who live outside their home country. On a general note it can be said that we are all more open minded (probably because 2/3 of the Swiss living abroad have double nationality and we all are foreigners in our new home countries) and less afraid of changes than our counterparts back home but we share our love for keeping up traditions and our environment with those back home.

Since 1992 we can vote from abroad – until 1980 more Swiss returned to their homeland but since 1990 more are leaving Switzerland to work abroad so the interest on being involved in the political scene at home is quite big.

We were also informed that three cantons had run trials with electronic voting via internet and sms and that all three faced no problems at all. So our long wait for this easier way of voting should soon end. Unfortunately all voters from abroad still have to re-register every four years in order to receive their voting documents always, the council hopes that this practice will soon be obsolete and that every voting citizen is treated the same no matter where he sends his votes from.

In order to have an opinion we have to be informed and it was with delight that the president could announce that the new radio/tv law which passed parliament gives a clear mandate to SRG to keep the services of swissinfo and that the Confederation should finance this by at least 50%.

Next year elections for Parliament will happen in Switzerland and ASO plans to create a web-forum and invites political parties for their input. We'll learn about

this in our August meeting. It would be very welcomed if some Swiss living abroad could decide to stand for election but it's also evident how difficult this would be. In order to get enough votes one has to be well known in the canton where he/she intends to stand for election and in case one is elected he/she has to be present to the Parliament sessions and a lot of meetings in between which would mean presence in Switzerland 50% of the year.

Huge concern was raised over the fact that Switzerland reduces her net of consular representatives everywhere for budget reasons whereas EU countries increase theirs. Within the last 30 years the number of Swiss living abroad has doubled so Switzerland should have an incentive to be present on an official level as well, as wellbeing is based on international trade and honorary consuls cannot always replace professional diplomats.

Another concern discussed was Parliaments intention to shorten IV/AI payments for those living in countries where living costs are lower than in Switzerland. This would be an injustice and should not happen.

This year's congress of the Swiss living abroad will take place in Basel/Bale from 18 to 20 August 2006 and everyone can participate. The main theme will be "partnership economy-culture" The sign up form will be in the "revue" and on the internet www.aso.ch.

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