

Political rights and integration of foreigners : the challenges of a mixed society

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recruits to define and describe a "homo alpinus" – supposed to be the original Swiss, indelibly marked by the Alpine landscape. But the Zurich professor, Otto Schlaginhaufen, finally had to admit that amongst 35,511 recruits examined only 500 were "pure" representatives of the "Alpine race".

We can laugh about such a thing today – and yet it is easy to forget that the ideology behind it is still alive in the minds of many of us. In view of increasing excesses against foreigners all over the world, such considerations give ample food for thought.

René Lenzin

Political rights and integration of foreigners

The challenges of a mixed society

Latest statistics show that there are 1.2 million resident foreign nationals in Switzerland, which amounts to 18% of the total population. The proportion has never been so high – a fact which brings bitter controversy in its wake.

Some people judge this trend favourably since it will create a modern multi-cultural society. But the situation causes anxiety leading to defensive reactions in some parts of the popula-

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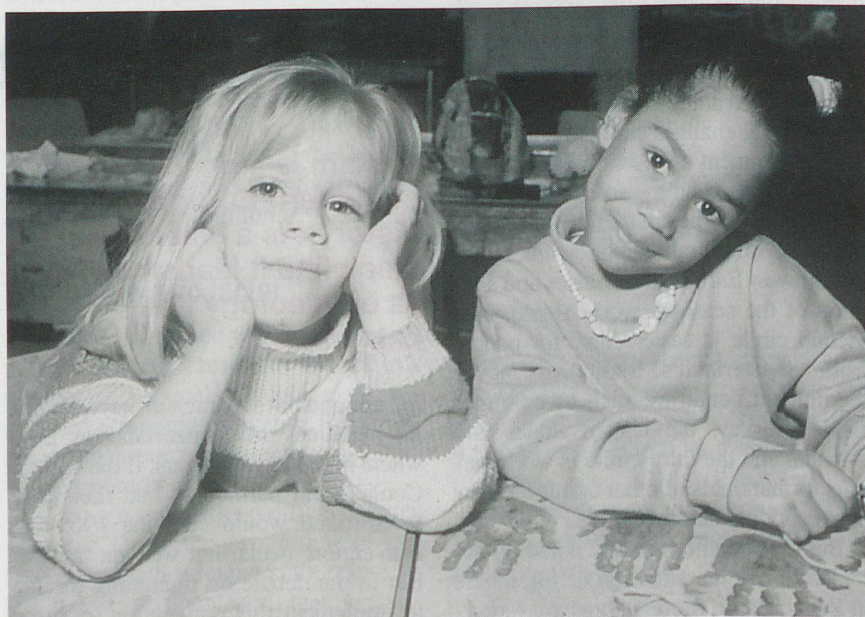
tion. This is reflected in remarks like: "If foreigners take our workplaces and force their ideas upon us, we won't be masters in our own house any more". Economic recession can transform such anxiety into xenophobia. In Switzerland as elsewhere, there is an increasing tendency for violent youth gangs to terrorise foreigners. The large number of attacks on hostels for asylum-seekers bears evidence of this.

The Muslim girl

The emotional effect on people in Switzerland caused by the problem of foreigners was shown in the uproar caused by a recent decision of the Federal Supreme Court. This excused a Muslim girl from compulsory swimming lessons because her father felt the Koran prohibited her from appearing uncovered in front of men. The real problem being dealt with here was just how far people from other cultures and other traditions should be forced into adjusting to ours.

but only to a limited degree – in just two cantons: Neuchâtel since 1848, and Jura since it came into being in 1978. Geneva and Vaud recently refused to let foreigners vote with 75% majorities against. In Ticino an initiative with the same aim did not even attract sufficient signatures for the matter to be put to the vote. In a number of German-speaking cantons, including Berne and Zurich, the electorate will soon be asked the same question – but there is little chance of their agreeing. In addition, a parliamentary initiative by the Labour Party (communists) proposing that resident foreigners should be given the right to vote at the federal level was overwhelmingly rejected at the June session of the National Council.

Most Swiss prefer the idea of easier naturalisation to giving foreign residents the vote. The federal government and parliament also look more favourably on this solution, particularly for young people born here.



Foreign children are different and take more time, but they enrich teachers' experience.
(Photo: Vivian Olmi)

Refusal to grant voting rights

Fear of foreigners has been expressed not only in letters to newspapers – as in the case just described – but in reactions to a number of cantonal initiatives to grant voting rights to resident foreigners. For the moment such rights exist –

The school as opportunity

School deserves a special mention in the integration of foreigners, since it is here that Swiss and foreign children are forced to mix. It provides many different types of opportunity to get to know and understand each other. Foreign children can also represent a challenge and an enrichment for teachers, even though the unknown quantity of different ways of thinking may increase their work load. In this area as in many others, the creation of a genuine multi-cultural society leads to many practical everyday problems. But it is well worth while facing the challenge with optimism. ■