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The challenges facing the

The members of parliament elected on October 22 should possess at least four qualities if they are to be up to the challenges which await them: perceptiveness, competence, willingness to serve and a sense of responsibility.

In many ways Switzerland is today at a crossroads, and the parliament which will emerge from the ballot box in autumn will have to provide some answers to questions concerning the

Pierre-André Tschanz

very identity of the nation. It will also have to set in motion substantial reforms, boost the morale of a country

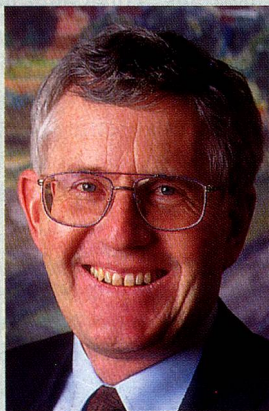
beset by doubts for over a decade now and regain the confidence of the population.

Winning back confidence

The state of the nation is by no means good at the moment. Switzerland was greatly shocked morally at the end of the 1980s by the secret files affair which involved large-scale spying on its inha-

bitants by the federal police and military intelligence. At the beginning of this decade the malaise was supplemented by a deep and persistent economic recession; in just a few months the number of unemployed increased tenfold, reaching proportions not seen since the crisis of the late 1920s. As a result social and regional disparities increased. After that came the budget crisis and the long succession of austerity packages. Politically Switzerland has had problems recovering from the decision by voters not to join the European Economic Area. The gulf which opened up between French-speaking and German-speaking Switzerland on Decem-

Message from the President of the Confederation



My dear compatriots abroad

Since July 1, 1992, you have been able to take part in federal referendums and elections by correspondence. In 1995 you have the first opportunity of voting by post in National Council elections. This extension of the political rights of the Swiss Abroad – which should go without saying – has an important political significance. It is a visible sign of the high estimation which the Federal Council, parliament and the population as a whole has of the Fifth Switzerland. And it is also a recognition of the economic and cultural contribution

which you, my dear fellow citizens, are making in every corner of the world.

On the occasion of a recent Congress for the Swiss Abroad I had the opportunity of meeting personally Swiss citizens from all five continents. I was most impressed by the enthusiasm shown by all those taking part in the discussions, which demonstrated how important Swiss politics are for our compatriots abroad. A subject of particular interest at present is of course Switzerland's relationship with the rest of Europe. However, in spite of our reserve the Swiss attitude should not be taken as a lack of concern for the destiny of our continent. Behind it lies an anxiety that by joining the EU our direct democracy with the unique right possessed by the people to be consulted might be adversely affected. For it is this right which binds citizens and minorities into the decision-making process on all important issues. The great interest in politics I have mentioned is also shown by the fact that so far about 60,000 Swiss Abroad have put their names on the voting register of a Swiss municipality. I hope that this number will increase yet again – not least because of the new and simpler procedure.

In Switzerland's system of direct democracy it is true that parliamentary elections probably do not have as much significance as in parliamentary democracies, where voters go to the polls at regular intervals but are not normally consulted on specific matters. But the importance of elections should not be underestimated. Over and above their legislative and decision-making functions, the two houses of the Federal Assembly are in fact the real driving force of our consensus democracy marked by federalism. In addition, parliament exercises important electoral functions. It appoints the members of the Federal Council and of the Federal Supreme Court and – in the event of war – a general.

It is certainly easier to reach a decision on practical matters than to acquire an overview of the whole electoral process. But elections are a central element of your voting rights, and I would encourage you now to take an active part in them. Face up to the democratic challenge. Put your experience of life at the disposal of our democracy. It is in your interest too.

Kaspar Villiger
President of the Confederation