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Autor: Ballanti, Dario
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Not everywhere is like Emmen

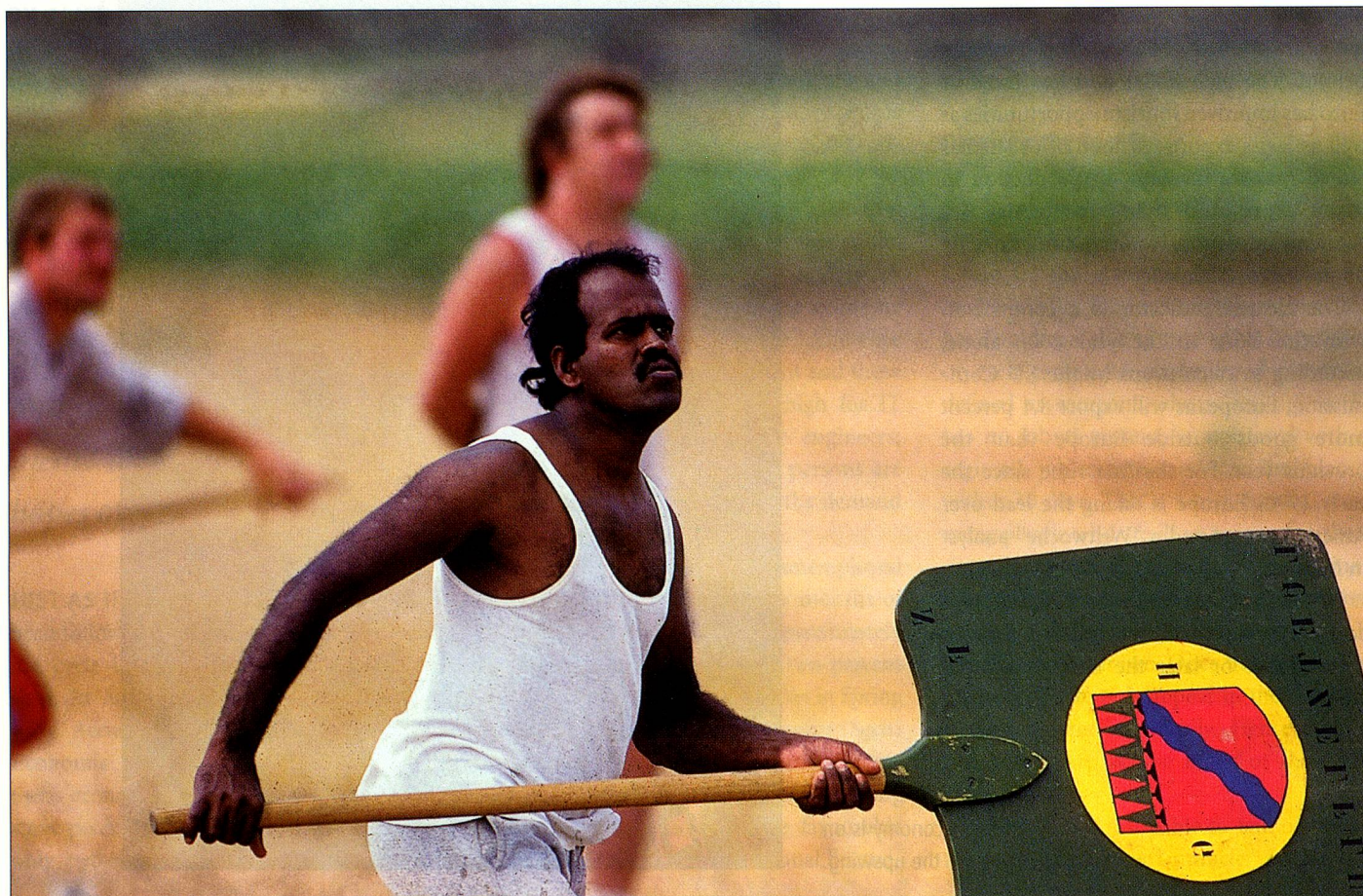


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Integration is a reciprocal process to which the host country as well as the resident foreign population must contribute.

BY DARIO BALLANTI

The Department of Justice and Police is working on a bill to facilitate the naturalisation of young foreigners. At the same time Swiss cities are promoting their integration.

THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY on foreigners is undergoing an important transition. It is also making headline news thanks to the vote on the bilateral agreements between Switzerland the EU as well as the naturalisation applications in the community of Emmen (LU).

Policy on foreigners is often mistakenly confused with asylum policy. The former defines measures for the naturalisation of foreigners resident in Switzerland rather than for asylum seekers or refugees from Kosovo, most of whom have already returned to their own country. This year the electorate and states are being asked to vote on the popular initiative to restrict the number of foreigners in Switzerland to 18 percent (see Voting, page 24/25 of this issue). At the same time the Justice and Police Department is working on a project to facilitate the

naturalisation of young foreign nationals who have been born and grown up in Switzerland and are therefore fully integrated in our society.

Proof that there are loopholes in the naturalisation process was furnished in March by the vote in Emmen, where residents were asked to vote on 56 applications for citizenship. In the run-up to the vote the Community Council sent all households a brochure containing a photograph and biography of the applicants (even to the extent of listing their assets and taxable income). All East European candidates were rejected, even those who had lived in Switzerland for years, while applications from Italian candidates were approved. Emmen's naturalisation procedure is based on an initiative by the Swiss Democrats which the electorate

approved and has given rise to heated discussions.

Long naturalisation period

On an international scale, Switzerland imposes the strictest naturalisation criteria. Persons wishing to become Swiss must undergo a three-phase procedure: they require the approval of community, canton and confederation. Generally speaking this is a long and complex process. Compared to other European countries the 12-year naturalisation period is extremely long.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance pointed an accusatory finger at our country following the Emmen vote, and spoke of an "anti-foreigner climate". The naturalisation procedure was also criticised. Only two percent of persons of foreign origins resident in Switzerland are granted Swiss citizenship; a tiny proportion given the fact that over half of the foreign nationals living in Switzerland have been here for over twenty years.

These statistics combined with the Emmen vote also gave Federal Councillor Ruth Metzler pause for thought. Her aim is to bring this highly loose-knit law up to date. The project for a law which would facilitate the naturalisation of young foreigners born and raised in Switzerland is already under way. In a statement to the National Council the Head of the Justice and Police Department expressed her disappointment and dismay at the Emmen result. Ruth Metzler declared her belief that the origins of a candidate should not constitute grounds for rejection, and that this could be

construed as racial discrimination. The Federal Council is currently examining the possibility of introducing a right of objection to arbitrary decisions on naturalisation based on nationality.

Emmen also triggered strong reactions in French-speaking Switzerland, and the city of Geneva even offered to grant the unsuccessful Emmen applicants a type of "political asylum" within Switzerland.

Examples like Emmen clearly demonstrate the failings of the current law. It constitutes a fundamental confrontation between the principles of democracy and a respect for the basic rights enshrined in the federal constitution. This problem is a difficult nut to crack, both at the political as well as legal level.

Priority on integration

In addition to revising the law, the government is focusing on integration. Recently the ordinance on social integration of foreigners was submitted for public hearing. The ordinance was drawn up by the government with a view to promoting the confidence of foreigners in Switzerland's governmental and social facilities, and creating favourable conditions as a basis for equal opportunity and full participation in the social life of the country.

To this end the government has authorised CHF 5 million francs for 2001, increasing to CHF 7.5 million over the two subsequent years. The Federal Commission on Foreigners (EKA) has submitted its proposals in the form of an integration report. Rosemarie Simmen, successor to EKA President Fulvio Caccia, declared that

Aiming to facilitate naturalisation


During its summer session the National Council approved a motion by 77 to 44 to facilitate naturalisation procedures. The aim is to allow foreigners who have been born and raised in Switzerland to be granted citizenship on application. The new system will also allow non-Swiss residents to apply for a Swiss passport after six rather than twelve years. LS

integration begins with learning the national languages. But the Commission has also proposed other areas where integration of foreigners living in Switzerland needs to be facilitated: information on our country, simpler communications, and the schooling and professional education of young people and adults. In addition the discussion on voting rights for foreigners is to be re-opened.

Cities as the driving force

The integration problem is being intensively addressed above all in cities. Whereas the proportion of foreigners is 20 percent nation-wide, in Zurich it amounts to 35, in Geneva 37 and in Lugano 40 percent. Local communities are faced with a difficult and delicate task. In certain districts, particularly in large cities in German-speaking Switzerland, the number of foreign children in schools clearly outnumbers Swiss children.

The city of Zurich is leading the way in its endeavours to improve the integration of the foreign population. Last year it presented a series of measures focusing on seven areas: language courses, schooling, professional integration of young people, integration at the local district level, raising public awareness, and improved integration in society. For the latter, a CHF 100,000 fund has been made available to promote creative ideas.

The example of Zurich has already set a precedent for other Swiss cities. Now the government's measures are eagerly awaited. 

Crisis at the EKA

The Federal Commission for Foreigners (EKA), an advisory committee of experts for all questions related to the presence of foreigners in Switzerland, is currently undergoing a crisis. Its President, former National Councillor Fulvio Caccia (TI), has resigned before completing his term of office. Representatives of trade unions and foreigner organisations have resigned in protest against the Federal Justice and Police Department's plans to integrate the Commission for Foreigners in the Federal Office for Foreigners, which is headed by the ex-chief of the Federal Police. In the spring of this year former Solothurn State Councillor Rosemarie Simmen took over the presidency of the EKA, but the boycott by trade unions and foreigner organisations continues. PAT