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## Electoral roll: "Sound barrier" of 100,000 broken

**The Swiss Abroad Council (SAC) convened in the National Council chamber in Berne on 1 April. More than 120 representatives of the Fifth Switzerland attended the spring session of the SAC and, before representatives of governing parties, consolidated the importance of Swiss Abroad participation in Switzerland's political life. The event, described by the President of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) at the opening of this symbolic convention as "an important gesture by parliament towards the Fifth Switzerland", also celebrated the breaking of the "sound barrier" of 100,000 registered Swiss Abroad voters in the electoral roll.**

Swiss expatriates are playing an increasingly important role in Switzerland's political life. Of the 634,216 Swiss nationals resident abroad, 485,105 are registered on the electoral roll. Of those registered, 105,212 or 21.69% exercise their political rights. By breaking the "sound barrier" of 100,000, Swiss Abroad have exceeded all expectations. This number is four times higher than the number forecast by the Federal Council when the postal vote was introduced in 1992 – proof of the growing interest shown by Swiss Abroad in Swiss politics and the opportunity to advocate their interests. "An important success for the OSA, which has campaigned for the rights of Swiss citizens abroad ever since it was founded during the First World War," emphasised OSA President Georg Stucky. The OSA hopes to see a further rise in this favourable trend over the next few years, particularly with e-voting, which it would like to see introduced before 2010. Swiss Abroad make an important contribution to Switzerland's political life. "Thanks to their dif-



Swiss Abroad Council convene in the special atmosphere of the National Council chamber

ferent experiences and cosmopolitan outlook, they add new impetus and an international dimension that enriches the political debate. This is why we rely on them," said National Councillor Thérèse Meyer-Kaelin, President of the "Swiss Abroad" parliamentary group founded in 2004 and consisting of 85 members of parliament. The growing number of Swiss Abroad registered on the electoral roll makes them a political force that should not be underestimated, and one that has the potential to tip the scales during elections.

### Parties woo the Fifth Switzerland

At the SAC spring session, representatives of the four Federal Council parties stressed the importance of Swiss Abroad in the political debate. The chairman of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), Ueli Maurer, spoke out in favour of a "sovereign and independent" Switzerland and against a closer relationship with the EU. Hans-Jörg Fehr, chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SPS), took the opposite view, describing Swiss Abroad as an "important political factor", adding that our compatriots abroad expected Switzerland to be "an open-minded and hospitable country". Marianne Kleiner-Schlüpf, Vice Chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP), emphasised that her party sup-

ported "electronic voting and swissinfo" and was in favour of an "open and intelligent" Switzerland. Thérèse Meyer-Kaelin, representative of the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP), described Swiss Abroad as part of the "large Swiss family", adding that this is why "communication among its members is accorded the highest importance." Claude Longchamp, political scientist and head of the gfs.bern research institute, highlighted the characteristic socio-political aspects of Swiss Abroad. According to the findings of a study conducted by his institute, Swiss resident abroad regard the ability to exercise their political rights not merely as an opportunity to honour their civic duty, but also, more particularly, as an identifying element that demonstrates their sense of belonging to Switzerland.

### No to cutbacks in the consular network

For economic reasons, several consular representations have already had to be closed, and plans are in place for further closures. The Swiss Abroad Council cannot accept this move and warns against such cutbacks, which would prove highly damaging for Switzerland. Parliament must consider the price it will pay for these closures in the long term. This issue triggered heated discussion between mem-

bers of the Swiss Abroad Council and representatives of government parties.

### No to foreign indexing of pensions

Equally unacceptable in the view of the Swiss Abroad Council is the most recent decision by the National Council to index invalidity pensions in future to living costs in the destination country if Switzerland has no reciprocal social security agreement with the relevant country. This measure would primarily affect Swiss citizens living abroad. Moreover, it contravenes international conventions. For this reason the Swiss Abroad Council passed a resolution on this issue.

### RTVG/swissinfo: Satisfaction for the Swiss Abroad Council

With regard to the revision of the Radio and Television Law (RTVG), the National Council followed the Council of States and finally opted in favour of a federal subsidy equivalent to at least 50% of the annual budget of swissinfo. The Swiss Abroad Council expressed satisfaction at this decision in the interests of the Fifth Switzerland.

### Congress of the Swiss Abroad:

#### Offerings for kids and young people

The seminar entitled "Partnership between business and

## **HELVETIA PATRIA JEUNESSE**

The Helvetia Patria Jeunesse Foundation is contributing CHF 25,000 in support of the children's and young people's programme associated with the Congress of the Swiss Abroad in Basle. The Foundation's 2006 donation will give many children and young people the pleasure of visiting Switzerland and participating actively in the Congress. We would like to



thank the Stiftung Helvetia Patria Jeunesse warmly for their commitment to this cause.

culture: The secret of Basle" is aimed at young people seeking to gain an insight into the exciting world of Basle's global conglomerates. At the same time you will get to know Basle and its many museums, and find out the origins of patronage in Basle and how the system functions nowadays. You can discover all about study opportunities in Switzerland and, armed with your experience of the seminar, contribute to the debate at the Congress of the Swiss Abroad. Federal Councillor Blocher will be giving the welcoming address to Swiss Abroad, after which he will take time to answer your questions. The Congress of the Swiss Abroad seminar will be held from 14 to 20 August 2006.

There are also some spaces left in the language course to be held in Basle from 14 to 25 August 2006. Learn German in the morning alongside other Swiss Abroad, enjoy an attractive social programme and practice your new-found language skills on your host family. As part of the Basle language course you are also invited to attend the Congress of the Swiss Abroad and take part in the discussions and celebrations.

Children attending the Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (Sjas) holiday camp will be accommodated in St. Ursanne, Jura, from 12 to 26 August 2006. The 40 children will also travel to Basle on the weekend of the congress and present a small production to congress participants. Children of congress participants also have the opportunity to join this group. Things are a lot more fun when you're among others your own age!

### **Register now:**

#### **spaces still available**

There are still a few spaces available for the second summer camp in Kandersteg. Register now! If it's too late, we also offer young Swiss Abroad the opportunity to enjoy an exciting holiday in Switzerland in August and September.

The Valais trip (Switzerland mobile – the mountains of the Valais) is once more a jewel in the crown in the Youth Service's summer arrangements. We offer young Swiss Abroad aged 18 or older a variety-filled week in the Valais Alps, featuring lots of action, adventure and fun. Activities range from an introduction to alpine sport to the ascent of an easy 4000-metre peak, wellness in the spas of the Valais Alps, and lots of fun with outgoing young people from all over the world (dates: 21 to 27 August 2006).

This year the Federal Youth Session is celebrating its 15th anniversary. To mark the occasion, a special programme has been organised in Laax/GR from 30 September to 2 October 2006. Participants over the years have expressed nothing but enthusiasm for Switzerland's Youth Parliament. The OSA will introduce you to Switzerland's political landscape and prepare you for the session and the topic of debate. You can then take an active part in shaping Swiss policy and meet important Swiss MPs.

As always, information on these offers can be requested at: *The Organisation for the Swiss Abroad, Youth Service or Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad, Alpenstr. 26, 3006 Berne*. Tel.: +41 (0)31 356 61 00. Fax.: +41 (0)31 356 61 01. youth@aso.ch or sjas@aso.ch

## **Leo Schelbert awarded 2006 Swiss Abroad prize**

**The international chapter of the Swiss Radical Democratic Party (FDP) has awarded the fifth Swiss Abroad prize to Chicago-based Leo Schelbert. The Swiss history professor was honoured for his excellent work on the history of Swiss-American emigration.**

From a list of 21 nominees, the jury headed by Dr Hugo Butler chose Leo Schelbert as the fifth recipient of the award. Schelbert, who was born on 16 March 1929, has lived and worked in the USA since the 1960s. In the course of his career, Professor Schelbert has authored a wide range of publications that have been instrumental in promoting

and fostering an understanding of Swiss living in the USA.

The FDP International chapter is delighted to award the fifth prize to someone who has shown such outstanding dedication to the Swiss expatriate community and whose work has a strong impact both at home and abroad.

The award ceremony was held in the Swiss Re Centre for Global Dialogue, in the presence of prominent figures from the world of politics, business and culture. History professor Urs Bitterli delivered the laudation. In his guest speech entitled "The appeal of the image and the power of curiosity – the 'NZZ' and structural change in the international media market", Markus Spillmann, editor-in-chief of the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", addressed a topic that appeals equally to Swiss nationals at home or abroad. pd

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