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Wealth problems

IN THE AUTUMN of 1987, shortly before the Swiss elections, I met a 35-year-old American primary school teacher from Los Angeles in Asia. I will never forget the stimulating conversation we had. Phil – for that was his name – told me about how difficult life was for American teachers, that for instance he wasn't paid over the summer holidays and that his salary was in any case so low that he had to teach English to immigrants three evenings a week simply to make ends meet. He said he liked travelling, and thanks to a thrifty lifestyle and his extra income he could afford to take an extended holiday every few years. Without complaining about his lot, he answered all my questions on life in LA, describing the crime in the sprawling conurbation, the drug problems and the appalling living conditions faced by illegal immigrants from Mexico.

However, suddenly he turned the tables on me and asked, "What are the principal problems in Switzerland?" I thought it over for a moment and told Phil that we were about to go to the polls and that environmental protection was the main election issue. The American looked at me in dismay and told me he'd found Switzerland a veritable paradise when he'd travelled through it a few years earlier; clean air, healthy forests and pure rivers. What had happened, he wanted to know. I said it was simply about trying to preserve the status quo.

What could I tell him today if he asked me about the principal problems of Switzerland? Would I say we had a problem with dangerous dogs? Or with the assault rifle and munitions that every soldier is required to keep at home? Or would I tell him about the problems we have with our welfare state? Would I dare say such things to an American, of all people, whose workers know neither a state pension scheme, unemployment benefit nor invalidity insurance?

"Small west and north European states only have wealth problems," said Berne-based political scientist Hans Hirter in an interview with Swiss Review. That puts Switzerland in the same boat as countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands.



Heinz Eckert

Our relative prosperity is probably one reason why the campaigning has been rather lacklustre so far. Even so, we would like to encourage all Swiss citizens living abroad to take part actively in the forthcoming elections and help increase the turnout over the last elections. If you haven't added your name to the electoral roll yet, you should do so as soon as possible. It's not too late to register for the elections on 21 October.

Never before have so many of the Swiss abroad stood as candidates. Will one of them manage to win a seat in the Federal Parliament in Berne?

This issue of the "Swiss Review" is devoted entirely to the Swiss federal elections. We present the parties and their manifestos, as well as the candidates that are of particular interest to the Swiss abroad.

If you want more in-depth information about the elections, we can recommend a suitable site on the Internet: swissinfo and the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad have together set up the first ever online election platform providing information specially aimed at the Swiss abroad. There will also be an election blog which will give foreign-resident Swiss citizens an opportunity to express their opinions and discuss Switzerland and the elections.

We hope that many of you will join in the debate, and look forward to receiving all your posts.

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Special election 2007 issue



5
Mailbag

5
Books: Urchuchi: exploring Switzerland's cuisine and eating habits

7
Images: Robert Gober's work

8
2007 elections: the highlight of political life in Switzerland

9
The current legislative period: the left braking the centre-right

10
A political scientist predicts boring elections

13
How the Swiss abroad can vote

16
Never before have so many Swiss expatriates stood for National Council seats

18
Overview of the major parties and their manifestos

20
Political lobbying for the Swiss abroad

23
News in brief

Cover photo: 2007 elections: who will win a seat the Federal Assembly in Berne? Photo: Federal Chancellery