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A chat with the Ambassador – getting to know a little more about Dr Nobs (Part 2)

Craig Press

On a fine and calm June day the Swiss Ambassador to New Zealand, Dr Beat Nobs, hosted the *Helvetia* at the Swiss Embassy for an interview. Over coffee he talked about his diplomatic and civil service career, his family, his impressions about New Zealand, Swiss history and culture, and how the Fifth Switzerland retains links to the home country. This article is an abridged transcript of the later part of the interview. The first part of the article appeared in last month's *Helvetia*.

Is the trend of Swiss people overseas rediscovering and reclaiming their Swiss heritage mirrored by the efforts of 'at home' Swiss to maintain their Swiss identity and way of life in an increasingly standardised Europe, and global community?

Switzerland has always provided the opportunity to Swiss descendants around the World to maintain their Swiss identity.

A number of countries that historically made a strong contribution to immigration to Switzerland, such as Italy, have changed their law not too long ago and their citizens are now allowed to keep their original citizenship when they become Swiss citizens. In addition to this, the multi-cultural mix in Switzerland was broadened by immigrants of new regions of origin, such as the Balkans, and also Tamils from Sri Lanka and other immigrants from Asia, Latin America and Africa. While this has been an enriching experience for the country and its citizens, it has also caused a number of problems regarding the integration of these new, culturally often very diverse immigrants. A political discussion on this issue is currently taking place in Switzerland and is a topic in the upcoming federal elections this autumn.

However, as recent polls show, a large majority of Swiss are very positive towards the general trends of globalisation and the general feeling among the Swiss clearly is that the country is well prepared, both economically and culturally, for the onslaught of globalisation. We are ready for the challenge.

In terms of maintaining our cultural identity, it may be surprising to see, how - in spite of the general internationalisation of our daily lives - a strong and publicly displayed Swissness has become the thing of the day, much more so than when I was a boy. Swiss traditional culture is alive and kicking and traditional events, such as for example "Eidgenössische Jodlerfest", draw huge crowds, even from the Swiss abroad.

How can Swiss abroad keep and pass on their mother tongue?

It's an interesting and difficult question but I think it has become easier over time although there are a few things that need to be stressed in that regard. The world is growing smaller and everyone acknowledges the fact today, in the time of increased globalisation, that the knowledge of foreign languages is a real asset and a huge comparative advantage in a world growing more competitive by the day. This realisation makes it much easier to pass down a second or even a third language in a family even here in New Zealand, a country with a particularly strong tradition of mono-lingualism.

How and why has dialect and multi-lingualism been maintained in Switzerland in a World of standardising influences?

The linguistic situation in Switzerland is - as weird as that may sound - in many ways comparable to African countries and is unique in Europe in the sense that our majority language, Swiss German,

is not written, only spoken. While there are indeed various dialects of Swiss German, grammatically they form basically one language, which - and that is often overlooked - is further apart from the language we write - i.e. German as spoken in Germany and Austria - as, say, Swedish from Norwegian, or Bulgarian from Russian.

The necessity for young Swiss-German speakers to grow up speaking one language and writing another is taken as the most normal of things. But there is no doubt, that - together with the fact that in Switzerland multilingualism at an individual level is strongly encouraged - the learning of foreign languages is highly regarded. My eldest son Sam, for example, apart from his normal daily life Swiss-German/German and English, keeps studying French and Spanish in a concentrated and focussed manner even here in New Zealand, only Italian he had to give up for the lack of time. His two brothers do the same, with the exception of Spanish for the time being.

The reasons for this multilingual situation in the country is obvious: Switzerland never was a one-nation-state where one people reigned, but as a consequence of its history always was a multicultural, multilingual, multi denominational country at the crossroads of Europe that could only survive by maintaining its multifaceted diversity and by protecting all these differences among ourselves. Of course, we turned this exposure to the variety of cultures and languages to our advantage in developing a strong science and knowledge based economic structure to be competitive with the best out there in the rest of the world.

What do you miss most about Switzerland?

Apart from family, friends and our house near Bern, it is probably

the old towns and cities and the short distances between the many diverse and interesting countries in Europe and the regions close by. But mind you, I do like it here very much.

I do feel privileged to be here – given all the cultures that have opened up to me as I am also accredited to some very interesting countries in the Pacific.

What do you think you will miss most about New Zealand when you leave?

The friendly and pragmatic attitude of New Zealanders, they are really relaxed and laid-back, including representatives of the Government – I have easy access to everybody, which is very important for my everyday work. Of course safety is also important, the fact that we can go for walks everywhere and anywhere is great, and I particularly enjoy our walks in what is left of the native bush and along the seashore.

Moreover, we do appreciate the distinct culture of Maori and the Pacific Islands people. It is opening up a whole new world to us.

Are there any quintessential New Zealand things you've noticed?

In addition to what I just said, it is undoubtedly the indigenous flora and fauna, which are fabulous. In the gardens the song of the Tui is incomparable and unique. I like hearing them when I wake up in the morning. I will also miss the clean air. Did you know that Wellington has the cleanest air of all capitals of all countries in the world other than some small island developing states?

Do New Zealanders understand the environmental challenges the country faces?

New Zealanders are very linked with their lands; whether they are aware how fundamentally that land has been transformed from its original state, I don't know.

What does the average Swiss person know and understand about New Zealand?

That New Zealand is very far away, that it is populated mainly by people with ancestors from Anglosaxon Europe, that it is full of sheep on green meadows and that it is an interesting tourist destination with great outdoor activities. It goes without saying that the America's cup yacht races between Alinghi and Team New Zealand in 2003 and 2007 have tremendously contributed to a heightened profile of New Zealand in Switzerland.

In the other direction, is there any understanding about the uniqueness of the Swiss culture and system of government here?

Let me first say that very much like in Switzerland I have got the feeling, that the America's Cup has given a completely new quality to the perception of Switzerland and everything Swiss to many New Zealanders. The relationship has developed a very positive emotional spin to it, which can only be created by very few events, such as international sport competitions for example. No matter who wins in such competitions, the emotions will stay on and complement our growing closeness as partners, joining efforts to address global problems that I have mentioned before.

This growing knowledge about each other enhances our mutual confidence and will help to bridge the fundamental historical differences between our two countries. New Zealand and the traditional New Zealanders of British extraction were, and felt strongly part of the larger family of countries of the Anglo-saxon world. We never had that feeling of belonging, always going it alone.

It is only over the last twenty years or so that New Zealand has become aware of its uniqueness – which always brings with it a little feeling of loneliness, right? – and therefore has gained a raised understanding for similar countries, like Switzerland, even though –

unlike Switzerland, where we keep a pretty equal distance to everybody else – in many instances international news are still very often dominated by Australia, the UK or the US.

In addition to that, New Zealand, for historical reasons, never became a Federation of provinces or states, such as Switzerland, Australia or Canada, but is a centralised state, not unlike Britain in the past. Due to its firm roots in the Westminster system of representative democracy, New Zealand never developed a system of direct democracy Swiss-style.

For that reason, sometimes I need to do some explaining of how we in Switzerland integrate our people in the political process, other than just have them vote every few years. But it is of course an important part of my role here in New Zealand to further our common understanding between friends.

What does it mean to be a Swiss in New Zealand, for those Swiss who are not first generation Swiss?

That's kind of hard to tell. In addition to individual family histories – has there been ongoing contacts over the years with the old country or not? – as I have mentioned before, all of a sudden, it might be worth your while to revive your origins for practical reasons. This then might or might not lead to a rediscovered sense of belonging, especially after a second or third generation Swiss has actually visited Switzerland and seen for her- or himself.

Thanks to today's means of communication such a rediscovery is much easier than it was a generation or so ago. After all, in spite of all the differences between the two countries there are still a lot of communalities, which make such a process easy.

And there is the Swiss clubs: You are doing a great job in providing an environment also for young Kiwis to partake in Swiss culture every once in a while without leaving the country.