

Swiss Society Annual General Meeting, 6 June 2004

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Swiss Society Annual General Meeting, 6 June 2004

Speech by Ambassador Sylvie Matteucci, Patron of the Society

Marianne Drummond, President of the Swiss Society of New Zealand,

Fritz Scheidegger, President of the Auckland Swiss Club hosting this meeting,

Representatives of other Swiss Clubs in New Zealand and members of the Swiss Society,

Dear Friends,

I'm delighted to be here today with my husband Aldo. As I just saw and heard, the Swiss Society of New Zealand is very much alive: its respectable age (70!) has not diminished its appeal. Let me therefore first bring you the best wishes of the Swiss Federal Council for the pursuit of your fruitful activities, and the greetings of the whole Embassy team in Wellington.

"May you live in interesting times!" is a wish exchanged among close Chinese friends.

We Swiss must have powerful and loving friends, for this wish has come true for our country. We are living in interesting times indeed.

In the thirty and more years of my career as a Swiss diplomat I have never ever felt as excited about my country as now. The country is on the move.

Many forces are tugging and pulling - in all directions. Let's have a look at them.

In **foreign affairs** - we joined the United Nations in 2001.

To our surprise we discovered that these new shoes fitted us well. We could stand tall, and we were heard. Switzerland quickly gained the respect of the other members of the UN. Rather than weakened, our image as a neutral country emerged from our discourse stronger than before.

We spoke with an independent voice and we spoke clearly on issues as complex as that of terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11. We condemned without hesitation *terrorism*, while pleading for understanding and dealing with its roots, rather than trying simply to eliminate its horrible traits. As the guardians of the *Geneva Conventions* on the treatment of combatants and civilians during conflicts, we reminded the States of the obligations incumbent on them.

We counselled for a multilateral approach to dealing with Iraq under the auspices of the UN. This position found the widest support among our citizens, just as it found broadest support among the peoples of Europe. Switzerland for once felt a unity of moral vision with Europe as a whole.

Our new shoes fitted so well that we could walk far from the trodden path. Our Minister of Foreign Affairs was the first minister ever able to walk from *North Korea* to South Korea in a symbolic gesture of peace. We have been working quietly since then in providing all partners with reassurances they need before they are prepared to lie down their WMD.

In the *Middle East* we evened the road to a private initiative for lasting peace - this has become known as the Geneva Peace Initiative. The Initiative has proven that occupation and terrorism are not the only voices there.

If we were not immediately successful, we will persevere. Switzerland is convinced that its views are sound, and the facts on the ground are bearing us out. There is no peace; there can be no peace without mutual understanding and respect.

European integration is never far from the centre of attention of the Swiss Government, or the voters. We have just concluded nine bilateral agreements with the EU. This represents the crowning of an effort that lasted 4 years. Some of the agreements are technical - like the treatment of processed agricultural goods at the border. Some are highly controversial: the EU eg, had asked Switzerland to align its taxation of savings on the EU's policies, which would have threatened our bank secrecy provisions. The compromise yields revenues for the EU governments but upholds the Swiss taxation regime.

Legal and judicial co-operation, particularly on indirect taxation, has been strengthened - as befits a common market. Co-ordination of border controls and the treatment of seekers of refugee status have been enhanced. Security should benefit from these agreements, even though the 'Schengen' agreement remains controversial in our country.

The agreements now go before Parliament. A referendum cannot be excluded on all or parts of the package.

There has been a flare-up of the discussion on joining the EU; in fact several cantonal parliaments have moved to renew accession negotiation.

Indeed, the current set of agreements may well be the last Switzerland might be able to negotiate. With 25 members, the EU has become an unpredictable juggernaut that is very difficult to move in the desired direction. At 6, Switzerland had three EU countries as neighbours. We knew each other and we had interests in common. The neighbours are now four, but the members are 25. Clearly, Switzerland is marginal to the majority of the EU countries.

Will Switzerland join the EU soon? This is very hard to predict. The mood of the country on the matter veers wildly between self-reliance and despondency. Some agreements we have just concluded make it easier for the country to remain outside the EU. The costs of joining are on the increase. The troublesome economic situation, the increasing delocalisation of industry on the other hand would rather plead for a further opening towards the EU. Failing a clear mandate from the electorate, the Federal Council and Parliament remain very prudent in this matter.

As other advanced countries, Switzerland faces a **fiscal crisis**: we can't afford the welfare state, as it was optimistically set up in the post-WWII period, any longer. Demographics are to blame, but also the growing size of the entitlement. What should we do?

The voters must decide in the end, and the voters have been loath to reduce their entitlements. The latest votes are not encouraging. The changes in the fiscal code were rejected, and so was the increase of VAT by 1%. The reform of social security was nixed too. Government and Parliament will now have to pick up the pieces.

The political scene meanwhile has changed drastically. As you know, one party has lost one of its two Federal Councillors, and the Swiss People's Party has obtained this seat - Christoph Blocher is now a member of the Council. Consensus building within the government has not become easier. In this unsettled situation parties are vying for 'market shares' and show little interest in seeking viable outcomes.

The Cantons have discovered that they have a role to play after all, Switzerland is a confederation. For the first time ever the Cantons have triggered a referendum - on the fiscal package - and won. Expect the Cantons now to flex their muscle in other issues also.

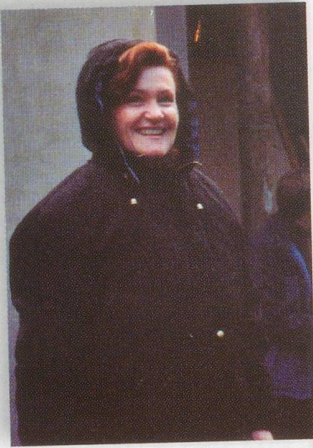
Reforms remain necessary. This is undisputed. What the country needs is reassurance that the weaker are not going to be left behind. Direct democracy implies a commitment to solidarity. This is the meaning of the Rutli Covenant: solidarity against the enemy outside the border, but also solidarity in providing opportunities for everyone and ensuring a basic safety net for those who risk being left behind.

How to achieve this, how to nudge and move the people towards reforms and reducing their entitlements is an art we need to master. Indeed, we live in interesting times.

This is certainly true in my case. Representing Switzerland in New Zealand (also in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands and Niue) means that one of my challenging duties is to make "Switzerland on the move", as I put it previously, better known and understood in this part of the world: in short, to bring Switzerland closer to New Zealand and these other Pacific Island States. I felt, and your President agreed, that my address today should aim at including the members of the Swiss Society in this **bridge-building** process. This is what I tried to do and I thank you for your attention.

112.4 - MSY

Wellington, 3.06. 2004



Above: Yvonne Buhler braving the elements to help Auckland win in the Kegeln.



Above: Fritz and Walter sharing a joke while presenting the winner and runner-up bells. Congratulations Auckland on a great win and getting your name engraved on the plaque for the first time... there will be no stopping you now!!!

Left: Members from Auckland & Taranaki competing in the Jassen.



Above: Vreni, Henry and Albert taking the scores in the Kegeln... no wonder Auckland won! Just kidding!



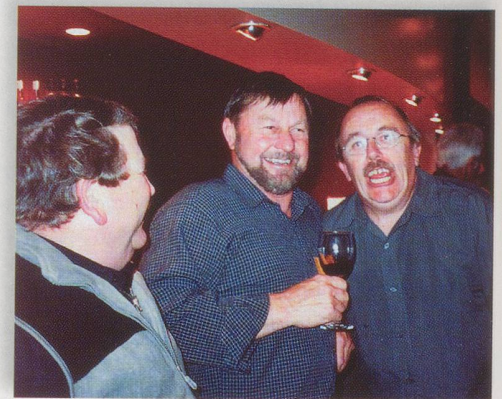
Above: Taranaki members were obviously worn out by picking up the skittles and Aucklanders were conserving their energy!



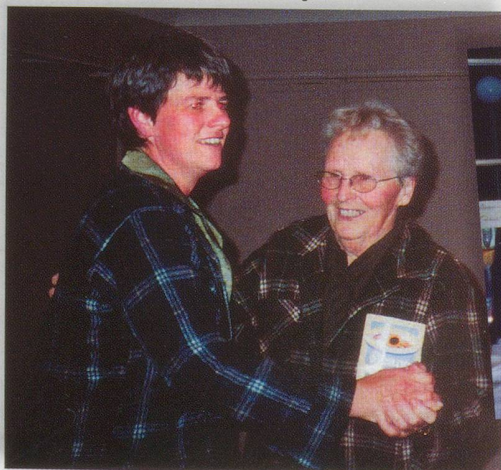
Above: Anthony Sherman giving it his all in the shotput, watched by loyal supporters.



Above: Ruedi Benkert helping the Taranaki cause in shotput!



Above: Mingling between the various clubs is great... Walter (Tki), Walter (Ham) and Erich (Akl) having a laugh.



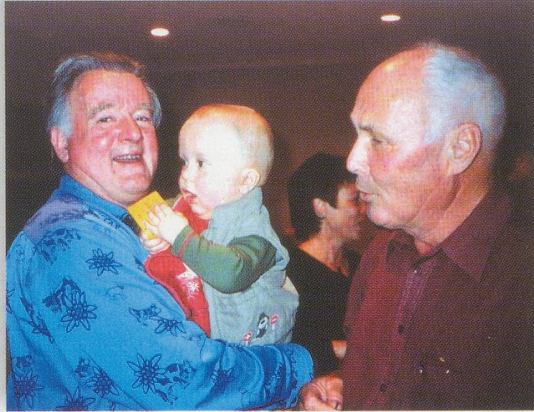
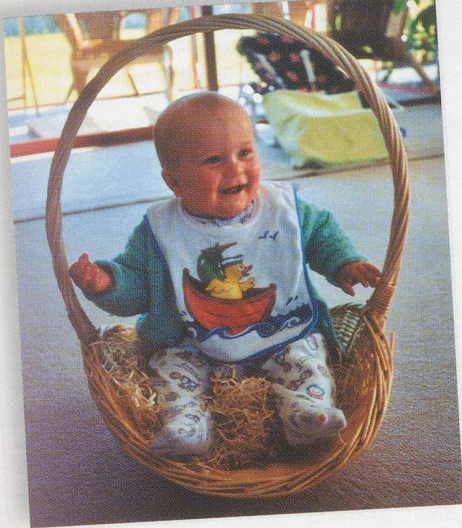
Above: Our Ambassador Mrs Matteucci-Keller and her husband enjoying the cultural evening.



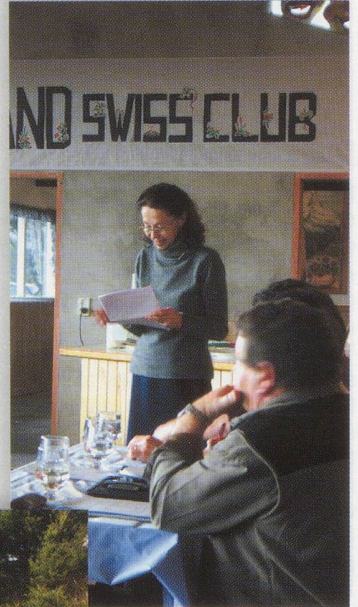
Above: Peter & Ursula Arnold in serious discussion?!



Above: Swiss-Kiwi yodellers gave a polished performance while the Auckland Swiss Club ladies' choir also sang beautifully (right).



Left: Taranaki's mascot, Daniel, in the basket won by his dad (fruit taken out!)
Above: Roland & Ruedi looking after Daniel.. is he in good company?



Above: The Ambassador, Mrs Sylvie Matteucci, giving her address to the meeting.



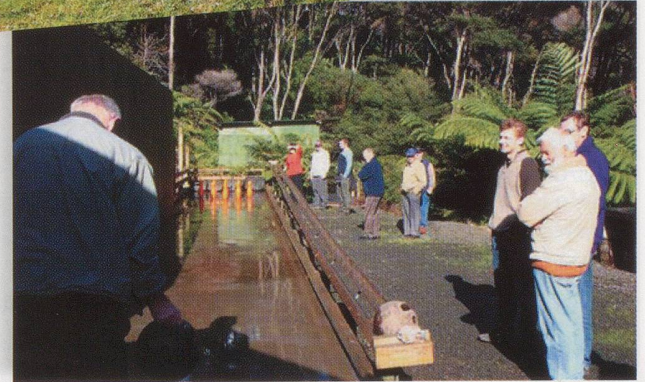
Above: Card competition in progress under the watchful eye of the Card Master Hans Iten - won by Auckland



Left: This has got to be the winning shot by Fritz Scheidegger's son Les.

Below: Yes, it was the winning shot!

Below: Marianne Drummond chairing the AGM of the Swiss Society of New Zealand, with Secretary Silvia Schuler, Treasurer Walter Seifert and Editor Paul Amstalden. Orlando Werffeli overlooking.



Above: Tension rises as the bowling competition heats up.