

Ambassador of Switzerland : 720th anniversary of the founding of Switzerland, 19 July 2011

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720th anniversary of the founding of Switzerland, 19 July 2011

Mr. John Hayes, Chair of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

Your Excellencies,

His Worship Ray Wallace, Mayor of Lower Hutt

Dear fellow citizens

Ladies and gentlemen

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa

Gueta Abig, bon soir, buona sera, buna saira

Last year, when celebrating our national day, I said that it was a very special day for me in particular. I had barely arrived in New Zealand, and celebrating our national day was the first official event in my new function as Swiss ambassador to New Zealand.

This year it is again a special day for me in particular, for other reasons. Why it is again special - I'll come back to it later.

720 years ago, in 1291, the founding fathers of the rural communities of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden laid the foundations for the Swiss Confederation. What the treaty of Waitangi is to Kiwis, the Bundesbrief, the Federal Charter, is to the Swiss. And if you look closely at the wine we are drinking today and that I have brought over from Switzerland especially for our national day, you will see a copy of this Bundesbrief or Federal Charter printed on it.

So, as I said, 720 years ago the founding fathers laid the foundations for the Swiss Confederation. And for 680 years, it was a man's world. Only 40 years ago, in 1971, Swiss men finally granted women the right to vote and to be elected - if not at the cantonal, but at the federal level, making Switzerland one of the last Western countries to do so.

The battle for women's suffrage was a long one: more than a century passed from the first attempt until finally every Swiss woman was granted the right to vote. It was only in 1991, when the last bastion fell when the Federal Supreme Court decided that the constitution of canton Appenzell, which still denied women the right to vote, was in violation of the Swiss federal constitution.

Switzerland had to put up with much criticism and even ridicule for this delay in allowing women the vote. But it is not only bad news. In contrast to other countries, in the Swiss direct democratic system the long and hard fight for women's suffrage had to be won by persuasion. Swiss men had to be persuaded that granting women the right to vote was the right thing to do. Female suffrage was not imposed by government or parliament. It was granted by an overwhelming majority of Swiss men, once time was ripe.

And another fact beside the one that Swiss men had to be persuaded may have played a decisive role: Switzerland was lucky enough not to have to experience a war in the 20th century. If we look at the world, two thirds of the nations granted women the right to vote in the immediate aftermath of a war, at a time when the "need for women" was indeed great. In wartime women had to take on jobs in the absence of men and they were able to show that they could do just as well. It may well have been this lack of wartime experience that could explain why it took so long for Switzerland to follow suit and grant women the right to vote.

2011 is not only about 40 years of female franchise. We are also celebrating 30 years since the amendment to our constitution which recognizes that women and men have equal rights.

Following this constitutional amendment long overdue amendments to the law were passed by parliament. To cite just one example: Since 1988 a Swiss woman is no longer under an obligation to have the consent of her husband if she wishes to take up work...

In one area however inequality has been hard to eradicate, that of gainful employment, an area in which women are still at a considerable disadvantage.

40 years since women got the vote, 30 years since gender equality was enshrined in the constitution, 15 years since the Gender Equality Act - and since last year a majority of four women among the seven ministers that make up the Swiss government! Moreover, last year the presidents of the two houses of parliament were also women.

Switzerland has indeed come a long way, catching up with New Zealand, which in 1893 was the first country in the world to grant women the right to vote, if not to be elected.

Today, both countries, Switzerland and New Zealand, face the same challenges: women still earn considerably less than men and continue to be significantly underrepresented in virtually all political and economic decision-making bodies.

It is not only with regard to gender equality that Switzerland and New Zealand are facing the same challenges. We also share the same concerns about the environment, about a world without nuclear weapons, and about universal application of the rule of law, human rights and good governance.

These common values explain why our two countries cooperate closely in the international arena on a number of issues. Let me just mention two of the many initiatives in which either Switzerland or New Zealand has been the driving force:

- De-alerting and de-legitimizing nuclear weapons, seeking to eliminate the nuclear threat.
- The Global Research Alliance on Agricultural Greenhouse Gases, seeking to find ways to grow more food without increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

On the bilateral level I must mention last year's signing of an agreement on sanitary measures with respect to trade in animals and animal products. Why must I mention it? Amongst other benefits this will make trade in raw milk cheese easier and safer. I must say that, as a lover of Swiss cheese, I took a personal interest in that agreement!

Switzerland and New Zealand are both small countries. Indeed when it comes to economic performance on a per capita basis, competitiveness and the satisfaction of the citizen, small countries are often at the top of the list. To give you just a few examples:

- Switzerland ranks number one in the WEF Global Competitiveness Report 2010-2011,
- number one in the global innovation index 2011,
- number one in the Press Freedom Index 2010,
- and number two in the Environmental Performance Index.

Switzerland and New Zealand have both shown that small countries can have a real impact. Or to put it in the words of Minister Tim Groser: "You don't need to be a big country to have a big idea."

Allow me now to propose a toast to Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, Queen of New Zealand, the people and government of New Zealand. To the Queen!