

Changes in the Swiss diplomatic network : centralisation of services

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The 1995 National Council elections: A guide

In Switzerland National Council elections are a political event which takes place every four years. What position does the National Council hold in Swiss political life? What is the election procedure? How is the voting paper filled out? These are the three questions which we are examining here.

The National Council is the larger of the two chambers making up the Federal Assembly. It has 200 members and represents the people of Switzerland as a whole. Its seats are distributed amongst the cantons and half cantons in proportion to their resident population (Swiss and foreign nation-

nals), although each canton and half canton has at least one member.

General elections to the National Council take place every four years, always on the last but one Sunday in October. Candidates must be of Swiss nationality, aged at least 18 and not certified as incapacitated by mental ill-

ness or instability. Residence in Switzerland and inscription in the voting register of a municipality are not prerequisites.

Proportional representation

Each canton and half canton is a constituency of its own. Swiss Abroad are entitled to vote in the canton in which their voting municipality is located. But they may stand as candidates in any canton.

In all 21 cantons and half cantons which have more than one seat in the National Council a system of proportional representation has been in use since 1919. This means that seats in the National Council are distributed amongst the various parties in proportion to the amount of votes cast for these parties and/or their candidates.

A number of voting papers are provided in the form of pre-printed party lists, together with one which is left empty. Only one of these papers may be used for

Changes in the Swiss diplomatic network

Centralisation of services

In the framework of restructuring the network of Swiss embassies and consulates all consular administrative services in Germany are to be centralised. If this pilot project goes well for all concerned it may well be extended to some other countries. Dieter Chenux-Repond, the Swiss ambassador to Germany, describes the Bonn "Service Centre" project.

On December 21, 1994, the Federal Council mandated the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs to bring together all consular administrative services into one department. In consequence it was decided to set up a service centre in Bonn. This will deal with matters concerning civil defence and military registration, passports, births, deaths and marital status, nationality, the optional state pension scheme, social security, consular protection, etc. Identity cards and voting documents

will be obtainable from the centre. Visas for Switzerland will also be issued here.

This will enable existing consulates general to concentrate more on economic, cultural, political and cross-border matters at the regional level. They will also be able to pay more attention to Swiss associations, the Swiss-German Chamber of Commerce, national representation and public relations.

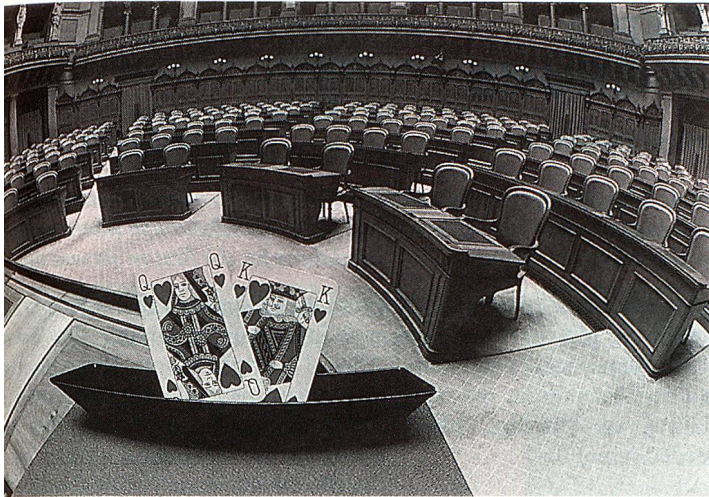
The Bonn service centre will be set up in stages between March and the end

of June 1996. Every registered Swiss citizen will be informed about the precise moment of transfer of his file in a personal letter from the consul general responsible for his district. This will also contain the full address, with telephone and fax numbers, of the Bonn service centre.

However, this centralisation process does not mean that the staff of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs can be reduced. In view of the ceiling on new posts throughout the federal administration as a result of the budget deficit no new staff can at present be employed. The tasks facing the foreign ministry have increased greatly, however, since more and more problems can be dealt with only through closer international cooperation. We only have to think of

migration, drugs, organised crime, transport, energy and environmental protection. Many federal officials are having to take up new and different duties. The transformation in central and eastern Europe requires new diplomatic posts. Twenty foreign ministry staff are now engaged in the field of good offices, particularly in the OSCE of which Switzerland will assume the presidency in 1996. This and other new tasks are forcing the Department of Foreign Affairs to rationalise and make changes in the way things are done.

An attempt is now being made in Germany to cope with the altered circumstances. All the present consulates general will continue to exist, and if a Swiss citizen wishes to see the consul general or his deputy for whatever reason an appointment can easily be arranged by telephone. The consulate in Freiburg im Breisgau will be closed on April 20, 1996, and its functions will in future be carried out by the consulate general in Stutt-



Which candidates are holding the best cards for the National Council elections?
(Photo: Ueli Hiltbold)

Voting material

Swiss Abroad entitled to vote receive their pre-printed voting forms from their voting municipality, as well as the various party manifestos in some cantons. Those who wish to know more about the parties and candidates in their cantons should contact the parties directly. You can find their addresses at the end of each party portrait.

voting. Parties may put forward more than one list per constituency. These are usually regional in the more populous cantons or are gender-specific.

A list may contain no more names than the constituency has seats. Every vote for a name figuring on a list also counts as a vote for the party named at the top of the list. If a party list contains less eligible candidates than there are seats in a constituency, the empty lines are counted as additional votes for the party named at the top of the list. The amount of votes a party receives is made up of the votes given to candidates and any such additional votes.

The party lists may be altered in the following ways:

● **Crossing out:** individual names may be crossed out. A candidate whose name is crossed out does not receive a vote. But the line which thus becomes empty still counts as an additional vote for the party named at the top of the list.

● **Mixing:** names taken from one pre-printed list may be added to another. In such case the party named at the

top of the list loses a vote to the party of the candidate added.

● **Accumulation:** all candidates may be listed twice. In such case they receive two votes. (Candidates may not be listed more than twice.)

● These three types of alteration may be combined.

A voter who does not wish to use a pre-printed party list may himself fill out the voting paper which is not pre-printed with candidates, with or without mention of a party. But all names figuring on this paper must be taken from one of the party lists. Empty lines on a list on which a party is not mentioned are not counted.

Election by majority

In those five cantons and half cantons which have only one National Council seat (Uri, Upper and Lower Unterwalden, Glarus, Appenzell Inner Rhodes) the majority electoral system is used. Here the family name and first name

and, where required, the address and profession of one eligible person must be written by hand on the official (empty) voting paper. The person with the most votes is elected.

Digression: The Council of States

The Council of States is the smaller of the two chambers of the Federal Assembly and has 46 members. Each canton provides two members and each half canton one member.

Elections to the Council of States take place under cantonal law. They do not necessarily occur at the same time as National Council elections. At present the period of office is four years for all cantons.

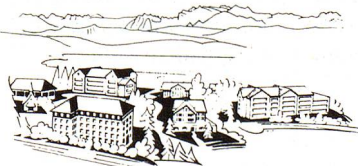
Swiss Abroad may vote in elections to the Council of States only in those cantons in which they have the right to vote at the cantonal level.

Paul Andermatt ■

gart. State-of-the-art data processing and computer methods will be integrated into the modernised infrastructure of the Bonn service centre. This will mean less staff without any reduction in the services provided to Swiss citizens. Indeed we may expect more balanced and more professional handling of each case. Business may be conducted in person at the Bonn service centre, but it will also still be possible to order passports and deal with pension scheme matters by post. Considerable flexibility will be needed in the initial phase.

Dieter Chenaux-Repond ■

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