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"An ambassador must represent Switzerland's interests"

DANIEL SAAMELI*

The Borer affair highlights fundamental questions on the obligations of Swiss ambassadors abroad. We put these to State Secretary Franz von Däniken, the highest-ranking diplomat in the Department for Foreign Affairs (EDA). von Däniken declined to comment on the Borer affair.

Mr State Secretary, how should a Swiss diplomat conduct himself nowadays?

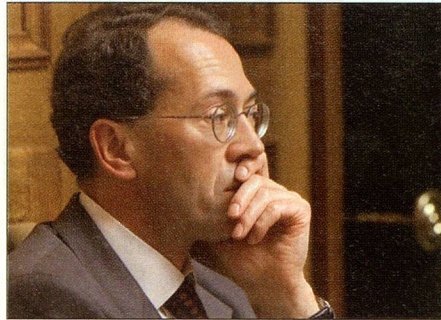
State Secretary Franz von Däniken: The requirements have not changed to any great extent: A diplomat must be nimble-minded, well-educated and versatile. He must be well-versed in all things Swiss. It is also important that all the linguistic regions of Switzerland are represented in the diplomatic corps. Future ambassadors must be convincing communicators and project an assured presence – simultaneously modest but self-confident.

Do we still need diplomats in today's world?

von Däniken: The main task of a diplomat remains to protect the interests of Switzerland. However, globalisation is to some extent shifting the focus of our activities. Political reporting, for instance, has changed. Much of the information which previously entailed major research efforts is now directly accessible. So diplomats have more time for other tasks. Personal presence, however, remains very important. One cannot solve a kidnapping case by e-mail, and mediation cannot be conducted over the Internet.

What are the tasks of an ambassador?

von Däniken: An ambassador must manage his mission and define focal activities. He must represent the interests of Switzerland. In so doing he must promote an understanding of Switzerland and raise awareness of our country. How he performs these tasks varies from country to country. It depends on the personality of the ambassador; there are different interests. While the obligations and guidelines on how ambassadors should



State Secretary Franz von Däniken.

represent Switzerland are common to all, ambassadors are free to set individual accents.

Where are the boundaries?

von Däniken: Ambassadors must observe the laws and customs of their host country and should honour their special conventions. Within the limits of their basic mandate they have extensive leeway in how they go about their duties.

Is there a code of practice for diplomats on how to handle the media?

von Däniken: No, not as such. There are, however, certain guidelines. Diplomats are given regular training on how to handle the media, and in this way develop a better understanding of information needs.

To what extent should the EDA protect its ambassadors and to what extent are they personally responsible?


von Däniken: Generally speaking, ambas-

sadors have a great deal of freedom in how they conduct themselves. In their material statements, however, they must adhere to the policy of the Federal Council and the Department's regulations on statements. Since we rarely encounter problems in this respect, the EDA does not have to protect its ambassadors.

Does the Borer affair signal the end of the Cotti era – the so-called "New Diplomacy"?

von Däniken: Certain basic elements of the traditional diplomatic mandate have not changed. Publicity work has become more important, but that applies to the entire administration. However, as I said, new instruments such as e-mail and the Internet are shifting the focus of some activities. So the personal presence and personality of diplomats is becoming more important. Moreover, the „new diplomacy“ still exists inasmuch as more women are being recruited for this profession.

What is special about the diplomatic profession?

von Däniken: The public image of diplomacy still suffers from a myth which is far removed from reality. The image of the diplomat in tuxedo with a glass of champagne in his hand is false. Diplomacy is essentially a matter-of-fact task with a strong international dimension. Much of a diplomat's day-to-day work is routine, but there are some tasks which can be better performed with diplomatic expertise: for instance, mediating between warring parties in the Sudan, or representing US interests in Teheran. 

*The interview appeared in the "St. Galler Tagblatt" on 20 April 2002.

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm

The „Borer Affair“ shakes Switzerland

The controversial public appearances of Thomas Borer and his wife and an alleged liaison between the Swiss ambassador in Berlin and a beautician fired up a cauldron of rumours in the tabloid press. The Federal Council has now recalled Borer to Berne. Federal Councillor Josef Deiss, Head of the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (EDA), told the press that his decision was based on the sole criterion of whether Ambassador Borer could still perform his function "effectively and in a dignified manner, with the requisite composure and, most importantly, credibility". Irrespective of the media pressure, he added, the Federal Council had reached the opinion that Borer was no longer a viable head of mission in Berlin (see also "Mosaic", page 19). **GK**