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When the Wellington Swiss Club had to apply for a fire permit for our 1st August fire on Petone beach a few years ago, I wrote an eloquent letter to the officer in charge, telling him about over 700 years of tradition and Swiss independence and heroic battles and how we celebrated the burning of the oppressors' castles with fires on all the hilltops in Switzerland. The man in charge was suitably impressed and granted us the fire permit, and the following year he still remembered and kindly granted us another fire permit straightaway and did so all the years he was in charge of fire permits. We always had a good fire and we were always careful to put it out before we left the scene, and after a high tide or two you could not see where the fire had been. I like the fires on Petone beach; they are informal get-togethers, and Swiss who do not come to the club still come to the fire.

What makes me feel Swiss? The fire, yes. And beyond that a tradition - not the tradition of Wilhelm Tell so much as the tradition of according participation to minorities. The voluntary proportionality in the Swiss Federal Council filters down into all sorts of Swiss councils and committees.

Voluntary proportionality ensures that minorities are not left out. When they participate in decisionmaking, they lose the stigma of being minorities with no say: Not only are the minorities part of the decision-making; by their sheer presence the majority is reminded of the fact that there are other segments in the population with maybe a different point of view, and they have a right to be heard and considered and integrated into the final decision.

And hand-in-hand with the voluntary proportionality goes the solidarity principle: The Federal Councillors support each other even where they personally

might have preferred a different solution, and they are willing to contribute to a solution even if it is not theirs.

Voluntary proportionality and the solidarity principle have nothing to do with easy compromise, on the contrary: They are a sign of tolerance and respect for the other side. It might take a while to find a solution all can live with, but it is certainly worth it and results in the 'unity in diversity' that I see as typically Swiss. After all, we all belong to minorities in some instances. This should not make us shrivel

up and be silent or 'make the fist in the pocket' as we say. We can speak out and even count on being listened to in fairness, just as we have to listen to minorities when we happen to be in the majority.

I'm proud to be Swiss and proud to stand in this tradition - and hope it will be upheld in the future.

Trudi

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