

## Address by Dr Rudolf Wyder, Director of the Organization of the Swiss Abroad

Ladies and Gentlemen  
Dear Compatriots

First of all, let me thank you warmly for your invitation. It is a great *pleasure and honour* for me to be with you here today. The last visit to Canada by a representative of the Organization of the Swiss Abroad was in 1995, the last official visit to the West of the United States took place in 1990. So it was high time to cast an eye on this side of the globe again, and renew contacts.

That brings me to the *purpose of my visit*. For some time we have felt the need to update our information on the Swiss communities in North America. It's important for us to find out about your needs, concerns and problems at first hand, and to renew and strengthen contacts with you and your institutions.

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Before we talk about some current issues in Swiss Abroad policy, it would perhaps be appropriate to tell you a few things about the *Organization of the Swiss Abroad (OSA)*, of which I have been Director since 1987.

Whether you are aware of it or not, you are all *familiar with the OSA*. You encounter us whenever you read the "Swiss Review", a magazine published by the OSA. You come into contact with us whenever you use the services of the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad for advice on legal or educational matters. And you know us as the organizer of holidays and youth camps as well as of the annual Congress of the Swiss Abroad held in Switzerland.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are part of the community of nearly 650'000 registered Swiss Abroad. Our compatriots can be found in some 200 countries around the world. They are organized in some 750 recognised *Swiss clubs and institutions*. In larger countries, especially in Europe, these associations have come together under an umbrella organization. And they are all members of the Swiss-based Organization of the Swiss Abroad. It is, if you like, the umbrella organization of umbrella organizations and represents recognised Swiss associations in their entirety.

The OSA is neither a state institution nor an emanation of the state. It is a *Non-Governmental Organization* in the form of a private-law foundation. Its aim is "to promote relations among Swiss Abroad and between Swiss Abroad and the home country, and to advocate their interests".

This formulation closely resembles the article of the *federal constitution* approved by voters in 1966, which now reads as follows:

*"The Confederation shall encourage links amongst Swiss citizens domiciled abroad, and their links with Switzerland. It may support organizations which pursue this goal. It shall legislate on the rights and obligations of Swiss citizens domiciled abroad, in particular on the exercise of political rights at the federal level, the duty to perform military or alternative service, assistance to needy persons, and social security."*

Now, that does not mean that the OSA owes its *existence* to this constitutional provision. In fact, the opposite is true: the provision I have just quoted is the product of efforts by the organization working in the interest of the Fifth Switzerland. The OSA was established back in 1916 – and not by public authorities, but by the New Helvetic Society.

The *structure of Swiss Abroad institutions* is a little like the United Nations, with several expert institutions surrounding the OSA mother organisation, closely tied to it but with their own legal personalities and decision-making structures. These institutions are

- The Committee for Swiss Schools Abroad (CSSA)
- The Association for the Promotion of the Education of Young Swiss Abroad (AJAS)
- The Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA)
- The Swiss Abroad Solidarity Fund (Soliswiss)

With the exception of Soliswiss, all these institutions have their *headquarters* at Alpenstrasse 26 in Berne, under the same roof as the Organization of the Swiss Abroad.

These various institutions share a common platform in the form of the *Council of the Swiss Abroad*. The CSA simultaneously constitutes the heart of Swiss Abroad institutions and a legitimisation basis for all the OSA's operations. This council – respectfully referred to in the press as the "Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland" – meets in Switzerland twice a year to discuss the concerns, problems and needs of our compatriots abroad.

*Representatives of organized Swiss communities* abroad form the majority of the 170-strong Council of the Swiss Abroad. Canada has 5 representatives in this assembly, 3 delegates and 2 substitutes. The US has 7 seats, 5 delegates and 2 substitutes.

In addition, a number of *representatives of Swiss-based institutions* sit on the Council. For instance, there are representatives of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), Pro Helvetia and OSEC, as well as the traditionally Swiss magic formula of major political parties. Currently there are nine National and State Councillors working with the CSA and ensuring a link to the federal assembly. In addition, a parliamentary group for Swiss Abroad has recently been created to serve as an extended network of parliamentary contacts. It is made up of 85 Members of Parliament, representing both chambers and all major parties.

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But enough about structures. No doubt you are much more interested in the aims of this body, which has been developed and perfected over decades. The OSA performs three *main functions*:

1. It keeps Swiss Abroad informed about important developments back in Switzerland and provides them with *information* on their rights and obligations as Swiss citizens.
2. The OSA offers our compatriots abroad a wide range of special *services*, from general information to legal and educational advice and the organization of holidays in Switzerland for young Swiss Abroad.
3. It advocates the interests of the Fifth Switzerland in their country of origin. In other words, the OSA is a *lobbyist* for the Fifth Switzerland and is perceived as such by authorities, media and the public.

The OSA performs its tasks in collaboration with, and with the support of the federal authorities, but entirely *independently* of them and within its own sphere of responsibility, based on its established position in Swiss Abroad communities and on the authority of the Council of the Swiss Abroad.

Over the years we have scored some *major successes* for our fellow citizens abroad, with the aim of enhancing the international mobility of Swiss nationals. These include

- the introduction (and at least partial retention) of an option to allow Swiss Abroad to contribute to the Swiss Old Age and Invalidity Insurance scheme (AHV/IV)
- the setting up of a system of social assistance for Swiss Abroad
- creation of the already mentioned constitutional basis for Swiss Abroad policy (article 40 of the new Swiss Federal Constitution)
- creation of a government-guaranteed insurance against loss of livelihood (now Soliswiss)
- easing of citizenship criteria
- introduction of postal voting for federal elections and referenda

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What are the *most important topics* currently addressed by the OSA as a service centre and lobbyist for the Fifth Switzerland? Of the many issues that we tackle on a daily basis, let me just mention four which I believe will also be of interest to you: first, youth and education; second, social and health insurance; third, political participation by Swiss Abroad; and fourth, information.

1. One of our main priorities is the *education* of young Swiss Abroad. Young Swiss nationals and their families can obtain advice from us (through the AJAS) on studying opportunities in Switzerland and related issues. Year after year, more than 1'000 Swiss Abroad use this service. Wherever possible, we also help students to find grants for studying in Switzerland  
Added to this, we (through the CSSA) serve the seventeen government-recognised *Swiss schools abroad*. About half of these schools are in Latin America, two in Asia, one in Africa and the others in Europe. At the moment, one of our most pressing tasks is to prevent the government cutting back subsidies even more in this area and therefore jeopardising the existence of Swiss schools abroad.

A great deal of attention is focused on our *young Swiss Abroad* target public. The sports camps for 15 to 25 year olds offered by our Youth Service have long been among our most popular, alongside the holiday camps for 7 to 14 year olds organized by the FYSA. Our goal is to offer young Swiss Abroad the opportunity to deepen their ties with their parents' home country and the country whose passport they hold.

These offers have been stepped up significantly in recent years and *extended* to include language courses, family holidays, work experience in Swiss companies, seminars on study opportunities and attendance at the federal Youth Session. Details are published regularly in the "Swiss Review" and on our website. I invite you to make use of these attractive arrangements.

2. Another main priority is *social security* for internationally mobile Swiss nationals. For years the OSA has resolutely opposed the planned abolition of the voluntary AHV/IV. With partial success: while Swiss Abroad in Europe have no longer been able to join the voluntary insurance since 2001, their compatriots outside Europe can still join the scheme provided they have been insured immediately before leaving Switzerland under the obligatory scheme for at least five consecutive years. Most importantly, however: anyone outside Europe who is already a member of the scheme can continue without any time-related restriction. And contributions already made are not lost, but at least result in a partial pension.

Social and health insurance are a prominent area of our consulting service as well as of our activities in the interest of Swiss Abroad. Naturally, one of the main focuses here

concerns the changes brought about by the *sectoral accords* between Switzerland and the European Union. After all, nearly two thirds of Swiss Abroad live in EU member states.

3. Since its foundation during the First World War, the OSA has consistently campaigned for *political co-determination* for Swiss nationals living abroad. Constant dripping wears away the stone: in 1992 our compatriots abroad were granted the right to vote by correspondence on federal issues and at federal elections. All too often, however, exercising these political rights is impeded by practical obstacles, and in particular long postal distances.

We are therefore making every effort to eliminate any remaining obstacles, and above all are campaigning for introduction of *Internet voting* as soon as possible. But we need to be patient a little longer. While pilot trials in Geneva, Neuchâtel and Zurich have been encouraging, there are still a number of problems to be solved, to ensure security and protect voting secrecy. Switzerland's federalist structures are not making things any easier. It may well take 5 to 10 years before the country's 3'000 or so communities will be ready for e-voting.

I am well aware that taking part in federal votes from America is no easy matter. But I would like to hope that, in the future, even more of you will *exercise your political rights* back in Switzerland. Casting your vote in federal referenda and elections is an unambiguous signal of the Fifth Switzerland's solidarity with the country of their origin. At the same time it is an action that defends the interests of the Swiss Diaspora. And last but not least, it does our somewhat introverted country good to see our compatriots abroad voting and see how they vote. You have close ties with Switzerland, but you see it from an external and international perspective. Is there any more efficient way of correcting the Swiss tendency towards self-contemplation?

As far as the *percentage of registered voters* is concerned, Canada and the US are among the countries that, shall we say, could do better. According to the latest statistics, 17% of potential voters have, up till now, registered in the US; in the case of Canada it is only 12%. The world average is 22,5%. I therefore urge you to register on a Swiss electoral roll and take advantage of the opportunity to have a say, e.g. in the next federal elections on October 21<sup>st</sup> 2007.

There are at least three ways to participate in these *elections*: Provided you have registered as an active voter, you may vote for the parties and candidates of your choice. You may, secondly, stand as a candidate yourself. And thirdly, you are most welcome to participate actively in the political debate in Switzerland. Political parties and media are very keen to get to know views and opinions of Swiss citizens with an international background. In order to favour this dialogue, the OSA and swissinfo will set up a special discussion forum on internet from June onwards. Please make use of this platform. You'll find more details in the "Swiss Review" as well as on our website

4. Political co-determination depends on *information*. This is another priority area of the OSA. Thanks to government support, our "Swiss Review" magazine, published in five languages, is sent to all Swiss Abroad households six times a year. The aim of this publication is to provide a varied, differentiated, up-to-date overview of Swiss current affairs. It keeps Swiss nationals abroad informed about their rights and obligations, and provides voters with the requisite basic information. Four times a year it also publishes country-specific information.

Naturally, the OSA has also had an *Internet presence* for some time and publishes Swiss Abroad information under [www.aso.ch](http://www.aso.ch) and [www.revue.ch](http://www.revue.ch).

We cannot, however, offer the very latest news. This is the task of *swissinfo*, the former Swiss Radio International. In the space of a few years, this branch of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) has changed from short-wave radio to an Internet platform. From what we hear, [www.swissinfo.org](http://www.swissinfo.org) is also highly appreciated and regularly used here in North America.

Over the last few years, the *future of the international services* provided by the SBC has however been rather uncertain. Drastic budget cuts were decided. In 2005, the SBC decided on far-reaching restructuring of *swissinfo* cutting down its internet-based services, currently available in nine languages, to a reduced English version. This would have meant an important decline in the international presence of Switzerland. A change, inevitably, to the detriment of the country and its global political, economic and cultural ties. And an important loss for many of our Swiss citizens living abroad, especially to the 100,000 and more Swiss voters abroad.

The Council of the Swiss Abroad therefore protested vehemently against the planned reduction in services. The OSA led a media campaign, parliamentary initiatives were handed in and we wrote to the Swiss Federal government. The Federal Council parties – with the exception of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) – adopted positions in our favor. All of this resulted in a full success: both chambers of Parliament *confirmed the mandate* given to the SBC to provide separate journalistic content for an international audience in our national languages and in important world languages.

The “Voice of Switzerland” – Swiss Radio International on short-waves – has disappeared, unfortunately, for technical and financial reasons. *swissinfo* is its continuation on the World wide web. We are quite *proud* to see that this platform goes on providing you with a digest of the latest news from Switzerland!

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Dear compatriots, as a descendent of Swiss Abroad, I find it fascinating and rewarding to work for our compatriots abroad. The Fifth Switzerland is the most colourful, vital and exciting component of our already diverse and stimulating country. The Swiss Diaspora is not a static entity, but rather a highly dynamic one. Year after year, the *total number of registered Swiss Abroad* increases by around 10'000. On December 31<sup>st</sup> 2006, exactly 645'010 Swiss Abroad were registered. That corresponds to the population of a large Swiss canton. In fact, it would be the fourth-largest canton after Zurich, Berne and only slightly behind Vaud. The voting power of the Fifth Switzerland is greater than that of a major Swiss city like Basel.

The *qualitative\* importance* of the Fifth Switzerland far outweighs its quantitative significance. Our little country, inextricably linked to Europe and the world, relies on its Diaspora more than any other nation. Our compatriots abroad are door-openers and bridgeheads for our global economic relations. They maintain an indispensable international network. They make their mark on Switzerland's image more sustainable than any advertising campaign.

Awareness of these factors is still under-developed back home. Taken as a whole, emigrants can count on lots of *goodwill*. However, this is not an automatic reaction. If we do not repeatedly remind people of our existence, we will be forgotten. And the importance of the Fifth Switzerland needs constantly explaining. Even if it occasionally seems an uphill struggle, we perform this task with commitment and with great pleasure!