

A word by the Ambassador on our Federal Day

Fellow citizens and friends of Switzerland:

It is for the second time my privilege, on behalf of our Confederation and of the Embassy team, to wish you all, your families and your Swiss Clubs a great 1st of August, the 725th birthday of our nation, the day that our Ticino friends like to call “Natale della Patria”. Eight months ago, on a fresh spring day, we have come together in the garden of the Swiss Residence in Wellington, to remember how this nation had been created by modest people, united by their firm will to decide themselves what is good for them, to do so democratically and to stand up for this core value, if need be to fight for it. We remembered that day the Battle of Morgarten on 15 November 1315. 700 years are a very long time. Our country has changed many times since then and is still changing, but freedom, respect for every individual and independence of our nation are values that have withstood the test of time.

We have remembered all this, together with many New Zealander friends, but most of all we had a good time, enjoying our music, our food, our wines and also our beautiful Swiss dogs pulling the kid's carts. Some of you have even told me that it was the best Swiss party that ever took place in New Zealand. Many of you have helped to make it happen – thank you again!

I just come back from Europe and from our own country. The European Union is in a deep crisis, and nobody knows what will happen in the years to come. For us Swiss who long ago and for good reasons had decided not to join this Union, this is a reason for worry. Some of the EU countries are our good neighbours and most important economic partners, and with all of them we share many important values. When countries like France or Italy are not in good shape, this will also affect us.

Many people have asked me in the past weeks what I think about Britain leaving the European Union. I believe for us Swiss the right answer is quite simple. We do not have to judge what another sovereign nation has democratically decided, just as we do not want our own decisions judged by others. But Britain is one of the three leading nations in Europe, has never invaded or threatened us and has been a steadfast friend at crucial moments of our history. We share with Britain a particularly important number of values, from individual freedom to the rule of law to the desire to have economic cooperation with the whole world. Britain and Switzerland have founded together, back in 1960, EFTA, the European Free Trade Association whose core idea, close economic partnership without political marriage, seems to me to be more promising and modern than ever.

All European countries face common and dangerous challenges. As I write these lines, I learn that terrorist scum has again destroyed the lives of many French who were enjoying their own national day and of some of our own compatriots. Moments like this one make us more aware that, beyond legitimate differences on how to run democratic societies or the economy, we belong to a common western civilization, Christian, European and Anglo-Saxon. It is the best the world has ever known.

Our own Switzerland, just like New Zealand, is part of this civilization, the first one that has ever put the individual man and woman and their rights at the core of everything.

Another crucial challenge is that of illegal migration. Europe faces an onslaught of migrants, some of them legitimate refugees fleeing persecution and war, most of them young men simply in pursuit of a better future. It is not an easy task to distinguish between the two, but states, including our own, must fulfill, above everything, their most important duty, keep their citizens safe, protect the nation's borders and have its laws respected.

When I told people back home that New Zealand debates whether to accept 750 or 1500 hand-picked refugees a year, most of them women and children, they looked at me incredulously. During the first week of July alone, in one small Swiss border town, Chiasso, 1300 illegal immigrants were picked up by the border guards. All over Switzerland, towns and villages don't know any more how to house them. Giffers, the small community near Freiburg mentioned below, will be forced against its will to accept 300 of them, one for every five inhabitants...

I have of course seen, during my stay back home, signs of these challenges, but mostly a country that is hard-working, prosperous, well-organized, with authorities at all levels that are not corrupt and at the service of the people, with less crime than in many other nations, just like New Zealand. Political violence and extremism are almost non-existent. We settle our legitimate differences according to our Constitution. I have been invited by one of our most important political leaders to share a Sunday meal at his farm, prepared by his gracious lady. It was a normal Swiss family home and there was no security. Perhaps only in Switzerland and in New Zealand this is still possible. All this is reason to be grateful, on our Federal Day, to those who came before us, who have created this country and who have steered it through times even more dangerous than the present one.

Just before my return to Wellington, on July 6, the Mayor and the Council of the village of Giffers, Canton Freiburg, population 1500, have invited me. Giffers is where Jakob "Zaaggi" Lauper (1815-1891) came from to

New Zealand. His whole life was a big adventure. From the Pope's Swiss Guards to our "Sonderbundskrieg" (war of secession) in 1847, from Mayor of Giffers to gold prospector in Canterbury, from explorer in the Southern Alps to his death as a lighthouse guard in Napier, it reads like a novel. New Zealand has named Lauper Peak (2485 m.) and Lauper Stream, both west of Lake Coleridge, after this Swiss adventurer. His native Giffers has, in 2015, set him a monument near the Aegera stream where he grew up and worked. A big group of his descendants, mostly ladies, from all over Switzerland, had come to spend the day with me as the representative of the vibrant Swiss community living in modern New Zealand. The Mayor gave me a little piece of the granite monument, and I promised to put it on Lauper's grave in Napier. It has been a great day!

I wish you all, citizens and friends of our country, your families and your clubs a great day on the 1st of August. May God bless both Switzerland and New Zealand!

Your Ambassador,

David Vogelsanger