



Speech to be delivered by the President of the Council of States, Mr. Hansheiri Inderkum, at the Inaugural Ceremony of the 125th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union at Bernexpo

Bern, 16 October, 2011

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Madam President of the Swiss Confederation,
Honourable Speaker of the Council of States,
UN Secretary-General,
President of the IPU,
Secretary General of the IPU,
Fellow members of parliament,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very honoured to address you at the opening of the 125th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I salute the contribution of the world organization of parliaments to ensuring respect for the rights of the world's citizens and their development.

The same willingness to seek agreement, understanding and prosperity was at the origin of modern Switzerland. It was no easy feat, over 160 years ago, to



unite under one Confederation cantons large and small, wealthy and less wealthy, Catholic and Reformist, speaking an assortment of French, German, Italian and Romansch dialects.

Tensions were running high and reached a high point when a decision had to be taken about how to organize the federal parliament. The liberal-radicals defended the idea of a national assembly that was proportional to the population while the conservatives wished to take up the model of the former parliament, where each canton had an equal number of representatives.

After a heated debate, the Founding Fathers who drew up the Swiss Constitution managed to reconcile the interests of both sides. They opted for a bicameral system modelled on the one adopted by the United States of America. A large chamber would represent the demographic strength of the cantons while the smaller chamber would guarantee each canton two seats.

The National Council, which today has a total of 200 members, and the Council of States, our 46-member Senate of sorts, have identical powers, but their state of mind, working methods and debating cultures are very different.

The National Council – the large chamber – is dynamic and noisy and often comes up with novel ideas. The Council of States – the smaller chamber – tends to have more sober discussions based on solid facts. Political persuasions remain in the background because no parliamentary group dominates, unlike in the National Council.

Our Senate is, in a manner of speaking, the chamber of reflection in the parliament, but above all, it reflects our country's great diversity. The minority cultures, mountain regions or outlying areas have as much a voice as the large economic centres.

The ties between the Council of States and the cantons are, of course, very close. Currently, 17 out of a total of 46 senators have been part of the



government of their local canton. But Swiss senators favour solutions that respect the federal structure of our democracy rather than the specific interests of their local canton.

The Council of States still reflects the manner in which the Founding Fathers of Switzerland were able to peacefully resolve the dispute between towns and villages so that the Switzerland we know today could emerge. I am convinced that our bicameral system has a future because it guarantees the country's cohesion. I am likewise confident that the Inter-Parliamentary Union is in full bloom, for its contribution to international dialogue and to the achievement of the purposes of the United Nations is unmatched.

Thank you for your attention.

Hansheiri Inderkum