



50 Years of the Swiss Science Council

Opening remarks by Prof. Astrid Epiney at the festive banquet

Hotel Bellevue, 5 October 2015

Federal Councilor Schneider-Ammann;
Presidents and Heads of the European Science Councils;
Former Swiss Science Council President Suter and Vice-President Jurt;
Members of the Swiss Science Council both past and present;
Representatives of the many organizations and bodies with which we cooperate;
Esteemed colleagues - and by no means least or last –
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here in Bern to our festive banquet in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the Swiss Science Council. It greatly honors the Swiss Science Council that Federal Councilor Johann Schneider-Ammann, who, as a member of Switzerland's national executive, oversees the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research, and that the heads and presidents of national and international science policy bodies have taken the occasion of our celebration to find their way to us.

Anniversaries, of course, are also a welcome opportunity to escape the laboratory and the rooms where we think, study, and write, and to gather in convivial company amidst the décor of bygone days. They give us a brief occasion to contemplate the path that has led to the present. We have rather rapidly walked up this path, it sometimes seems, and an anniversary gives us the opportunity to pause for a moment along it and muse over long-forgotten insights, such as that:

Switzerland finds itself in a “peculiar position, suspended between confidence and nagging doubt.”

The words are those of Max Imboden, an expert in constitutional law and the first president of the Swiss Science Council. Though first formulated half a century ago, they have lost none of their topicality. In his book “The Helvetian Malaise,” a small work that became a best-seller, Imboden described the mood of a nation that oscillates, as he put it, between “affirmation and negation”. The diagnosis back then fits the current situation as well. Switzerland, which “was a revolutionary nation in the 19th century,” in Imboden's view, once again cannot decide whether to seal itself off or to open itself out to the world.

Dear Guests:

This evening, we welcome you to Bern. Representatives of our European sister organizations have travelled from Finland, Bulgaria, Denmark and Lithuania to participate in our annual meeting, and to ask what is needed for higher education, research, and innovation to thrive. Of course it is true, as Voltaire's *Candide* reminded us, that we must cultivate our (own!) garden. But to pursue all the facets possible in research and innovation, and in our educational institutions, it can greatly help to also look over the fence into other gardens. For what we seek – new knowledge and new insights – we can only find together, and in an open dialogue with one another. Science is by its nature and history an international endeavor. In the “unconstrained compulsion of the better argument,” as Karl Schmid, second president of the Swiss Science Council, put it, “we are always conscious that we do not possess the truth. It is always veiled, and always before us.”

Why is it so important that science and research continue to play key roles in our society? It is not just because it helps ensure our prosperity. What I find far more decisive – and this is perhaps an aspect that nowadays is in danger of being lost from sight – is that this work stands for a kind of culture that is vital for the welfare of modern society. Academic research raises questions that otherwise go unanswered in our everyday lives, and it calls into question what is taken for granted or is claimed as the wisdom of experience. It also encourages the exchange of information across boundaries and borders, and thereby expands horizons. To be sure: that can also engender new uncertainties and new anxieties. But even here, it teaches us how to address what we do not know in a productive manner: through reflection, being systematic and methodical, and being open as to outcome.

If the Swiss Science Council, on this anniversary, can express one wish, then it would be this: That policy-makers and society in our countries continue to trust in science and research, and that the researchers themselves answer this trust responsibly, and even with wisdom, with the knowledge and insights their research brings to us all. In that way, Switzerland, and with it Europe, can continue to look to the future with confidence and assurance.

Federal Councilor Johann Schneider-Ammann will honor us with a few remarks - but not until after we have all enjoyed the hors-d'œuvre. Enjoy!