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50 years of SSIC

Bern, 05.10.2015 - Speech by Federal Councillor Johann N. Schneider-Ammann

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to this celebration of 50 years of existence, your golden jubilee. It is a great honour to be here and to speak to such a distinguished Swiss, and indeed international audience. 50 years: to describe this occasion as golden, as though we were talking about a marriage, seems fitting to me.

Because in a way, the SSIC has been married to science since 1965 and has been a caring and devoted partner from the start. In good times and in bad. Ensuring that this remains the case is not merely in the interest of my Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research.

Quite the opposite: the SSIC is - and should certainly remain - the advisory body to the entire Swiss government. A position it rightly occupies. We are, however, aware that responsibility for the future prosperity of nations does not rest solely on the shoulders of science and research. Nevertheless, today - in the 21st century - knowledge affects our society in all its facets. Knowledge, new knowledge, affects every single individual - it affects individual businesses, and the economy as a whole.

It affects health and social policy. As well as energy, environment, security and foreign policy, to mention a few more. Furthermore, pressing global challenges are often issues that affect a wide range of policy areas. It is therefore even more important we provide a system and a framework for science that facilitates the output of research findings and knowledge in various forms.

In order to do this, the Federal Council needs a strong SSIC. An independent voice representing research and higher education. Let's look back at the SSIC's history. The shift that took place in the sixties from 'universities for the elite' to 'universities for a broader public', along with rapid developments in science and medicine made federal funding for the cantonal universities inevitable.

The expansion of higher education, university teaching and research was a response to increased demand from both business and society. To help meet that demand, parliament approved related legislation in 1965 - the predecessor of the first Higher Education Act in 1969. From that point on, the Federal Council required a permanent body to advise on all questions related to the new university and research policy.

So that very same year, 1965, the Federal Council established its advisory body - the Swiss Science Council (SSC). Political progress at the double, as it were. Back then, the Federal Council equipped the SSC with essentially the same rights, obligations and tasks that still apply to the SSIC of today. One of its tasks is to take a critical look at the political world and the administration.

Regardless of how welcome this criticism may be. A good advisor is a critical advisor - and not a sycophant. He raises the key issues. He is capable of looking ahead - beyond the narrow four-year timeframe elected politicians tend to focus on. And he is ahead of the game, and recognises - or even better, sets trends.

All of these things are especially important when it comes to science. Because in science, the element of change and transformation is inherent, the need for a new agenda, as it were.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Switzerland's accomplishments in education, research and innovation (ERI) are considerable. In these fields, we are one of the leading countries in the world. It seems clear that this is due to the SSIC's efforts and our political endeavours to intelligently promote ERI.

Of course, proving a causal link between the two is hard to do, as the effects can only be seen in the long term. Nevertheless, even though this is its golden jubilee, you can rest assured that politeness is not the reason why I am stressing the importance of the SSIC's

role as an enabler of successful ERI policy. The evolution of the name of the institution we are celebrating here today gives us interesting insights into how ERI policy has changed in the past 50 years.

I have already mentioned the Swiss Science Council (SSC). In 2000, the SSC became the Swiss Science and Technology Council (SSTC). With this name change, the Council transformed from a mouthpiece for "pure science" to a council that also offers systemic and thematic input with regard to the application of knowledge, to create innovative and therefore marketable products - specifically: technology.

This was a narrow view - too narrow a view. Last year's name change - from SSTC to SSIC, replacing the T for Technology with an I for Innovation - reflects a change of focus that actually took place much earlier. The SSIC advocates a broad understanding of what innovation means. On the one hand, it sees the big picture and not just immediate commercial interests. On the other hand, it has pointed out the enormous potential for social innovation.

Innovation can take the form of ultra-modern technical devices that we keep in our pockets and use to email and skype, to take pictures and keep track of our busy schedules, listen to music and - last but not least - even talk to people every now and then. Innovation can, however, also be intangible in nature. Novel ways of thinking, new processes and practices - this, too, is innovation.

We need both of these things. Not just innovative, tangible objects but also innovative thinking. As I've said, a good advisor is a critical advisor. In politics, this is generally accepted. Because we can learn from our advisor and benefit from his advice. The SSIC's reports, evaluations and recommendations on university and research policy are invaluable. They help reveal weaknesses, make improvements and reforms, and thereby keep our funding system in tip-top shape.

Considering these points, it is clear that the SSIC can and should play a questioning and accordingly supportive role - and be free to do so without restriction. That being said, I would now like to voice one expectation we from the world of politics do have. We expect you to recognise that, politically speaking, not all the measures the science and research community expects are immediately possible and realisable.

Science and research naturally know no boundaries. This is certainly a good thing, for how else could humanity increase its knowledge? But things are different in the political world, where there are financial and legal limits to what can be done. I am mentioning this with my eye clearly on the 2017-2020 ERI policy, which we are currently developing.

The SSIC's wishes and recommendations will be part of this process. We agree, for instance, that the challenges regarding the next generation in science or university medicine must be addressed. What's more, financing for education, research and innovation will be increased within the limits of what is possible. These fields are priorities for both the Federal Council and the SSIC. So let us all work together to ensure our objectives lie within the realm of what is politically feasible. I am counting on you.

Ladies and gentlemen, to conclude: I would like to thank the SSIC for its work. I greatly appreciate your commitment to the continuous optimisation of Swiss ERI. The effects of globalisation will soon be omnipresent. Which is why it is even more important to give the necessary importance to international exchange and benchmarking in relation to ERI topics

Today, Switzerland is a key player in education, research and innovation. All indicators point to this fact. The French moralist François de la Rochefoucauld once wisely said, "The surest way to be deceived is to consider oneself cleverer than others." With this in mind, I expressly welcome tomorrow's annual meeting of the European Science Councils in Bern.

The question of what makes education, research and innovation successful is highly relevant. I am convinced your discussions will be productive and benefit all concerned. I would like to thank the chairpersons of the European Science Councils for their willingness to meet here in Switzerland and discuss these vital questions our society faces.

I would like to combine this thanks with a request to our European guests. As you know, we are currently involved in Horizon 2020, the EU's main instrument for implementing a common science and innovation policy, and will continue to be part of this programme until the end of 2016. If we are unable to find a solution with the EU by then, we run the risk of being downgraded to third country status.

Support us by taking every opportunity to advocate Switzerland's full association with Horizon 2020, so that we may contribute to this important programme.

Thank you.

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