

World News

The Times - online

September 27, 2004

'Appeal against hatred' fails to sway Swiss in citizenship vote

BY ANTHONY BROWNE, EUROPE CORRESPONDENT

VOTERS in Switzerland, where one fifth of the population is officially classified as foreign, have rejected a government plan to make it easier for second and third-generation immigrants to get a Swiss passport.

In a nationwide referendum yesterday, voters narrowly rejected two government proposals to liberalise citizenship rules which are among the toughest in the world. There is no automatic right to citizenship for those born in Switzerland, even if they are children or grandchildren of immigrants.

The bitter referendum campaign was marked by posters depicting dark-skinned youngsters grabbing Swiss passports, while leaflets gave warning of a massive growth in the Muslim population, illustrated by a photograph of Osama bin Laden in a Swiss ID card.

The Government and some opposition parties ran an unprecedented "appeal against hatred" in the last week of the campaign. However, early results showed that both proposals were rejected by more than 51 per cent of voters. "This is a sad day for Switzerland," Claudio Micheloni, the head of the Migrants' Integration Association, said.

However, opponents said that the rule changes would undermine what it meant to be Swiss. "We don't want Switzerland to be a doorway for all and sundry. The current rules are fine," said Maria Angela Guyot, an official of the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP), which at the last election became the largest political party in the country.

Because it is so difficult to become Swiss, Switzerland has the highest proportion of "foreign" residents in Europe, with 1.5 million of 7 million residents officially classified as foreigners. Immigrants have to be resident for 12 years before they are entitled to apply for citizenship, compared with four in the UK.

They must then be approved by a local citizenship committee, who will interview them to determine whether they are "Swiss" enough to be entitled to Swiss citizenship. This means that many people, particularly of non-European cultural background, find it difficult to obtain citizenship. Roland Schaerer, head of the Government's Department of Naturalisation, who drafted the new proposals, said: "We've got children who were born here, who are growing up just like Swiss children, but feel excluded because they know they won't be able to participate in our democratic process.

"That's not just bad for them, that's bad for our society; a healthy democracy requires that everyone participates."

The Government proposed that immigrants' grandchildren born in the country should automatically get Swiss citizenship, and suggested easier procedures for immigrants aged from 14 to 24 who have settled and been educated in Switzerland. It hoped that the changes would increase the number of citizen applications from about 37,000 to 52,000 a year.

The proposals were passed by parliament, but under Switzerland's direct democracy, they also had to be passed by national referendums.

Immigrant communities and the country's main trade union grouping said that they had filed a legal complaint about campaigning by members of the SVP. But an emboldened SVP said yesterday that it would press ahead with campaigns to outlaw dual citizenship and to allow local voters to be the final arbiter of each Swiss citizenship application.