

Finanzdelegation

Délégation des finances

Delegazione delle finanze

Joint Committee on Finance

Eidgenössische Finanzkontrolle

Contrôle fédéral des finances

Controllo federale delle finanze

Swiss Federal Audit Office



100 ans



125 Jahre

Welcoming Address delivered by Mr. Yves Christen, 1st Vice-President of the National Council

Dear Mr. President of the Swiss Confederation,
Mr. President of the Council of States,
Ladies and Gentlemen Auditors-General of the supreme audit institutions and presidents of the courts of audit of Europe, France, Italy, the Federal Republic of German, Austria, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands,
Ladies and Gentlemen who preside over Switzerland's public and private audit bodies,
Ladies and Gentlemen, and distinguished Colleagues,

The agenda of Madam President of the National Council has been somewhat disturbed by Switzerland's entry into the United Nations and the ceremony to this effect which is being held during these very days in New York.

This is why I have been conferred the honor of standing in for her to extend to you a most cordial welcome - in her name and on behalf of the entire National Council - to our Federal Palace which, just like the system of high supervision of the Confederation's finances, is celebrating its centennial this year.

As enshrined in Article 85 of the Swiss Federal Constitution of 1874 and in Article 169 of our new Constitution of 1999, it is exclusively incumbent on the Federal Parliament of Switzerland to exercise the high supervision of our Federal State's finances.

The Swiss Parliament had no intention of ceding this function to a general audit office. This is the reason why further to a proposal of the Federal Council, the Swiss Parliament equipped itself with its own particular system of high supervision of Federal finances.

I will let Messrs. Pierre Paupe, member of the Council of States and Chairman of the Joint Committee on Finance (also referred to as the Finance Delegation), and Kurt Grüter, Director of the Federal Audit Office, fill you in on the workings of this system in more detail.

As for me, I would like to share with you a few reflections concerning the tasks of the Finance Committees and of the Joint Committee on Finance inasmuch as they are bodies issuing from the Swiss legislative branch.

For the Parliament, the Finance Committees are, along with the Control Committees, first and foremost oversight bodies. The legislative committees of Parliament are each concerned with their own specific subject area listed down the line, take for instance the Committee for Transportation and Telecommunications, or the Committee for Social Security and Health. For their part, the Finance Committees are called to a universal mission in that they are charged with monitoring, from the financial point of view, all of the activities of the state and of the administration, be they in the field of health, transportation, security policy, agriculture, etc.

Thus, by virtue of the very mission entrusted to them, the Finance Committees are the only committees to lay claim on a global view of the finances of the Swiss Confederation and on the manner in which the financial situation unfolds.

This explains why the National Council and the Council of States unceasingly provide their Finance Committees with the means required to examine - in terms of its financial implications - every project they are called upon to deal with.

This mode of operation stems from the fundamental application principle of supervision, according to which the body which approves a law should not also be the body vested with the task of assessing the financial impact.

While the activities of the Finance Committees remain open to the scrutiny of Parliament, the features and the activities of the Joint Committee on Finance appear to Parliament as somewhat obscure. No doubt, this is due to the fact that the Joint Committee on Finance operates with discretion.

As we shall see, this can be illustrated by the events which took place in autumn 2001. It turned out that in early October 2001, the Swiss long-haul airline company Swissair had declared bankruptcy. The company's planes were grounded, thus leaving thousands of passengers and ticket holders stranded in numerous airports throughout the world.

This event came as a shock and prompted the Federal Council to engage in a concerted effort, together with the Swiss banks and other partners from the private sector, to save whatever could be saved of our national carrier.

And so it is that the Joint Committee on Finance, utilizing the mechanisms with which it was empowered by law, was - at the behest of the Federal Council - urgently called to vote upon the extension of a record 2 billion franc credit in the name and on behalf of Parliament.

This, in turn, led to voices being raised in Parliament in protest of a procedure judged by some parliamentarians as being antidemocratic. Motions were tabled demanding that limits be set on the powers of the Joint Committee on Finance, powers which had not been fully appreciated and were judged to be exorbitant.

In the final analysis, however, Parliament voted *a posteriori* to approve the decision which the Federal Council had requested be taken by the Joint Committee on Finance.

The Joint Committee on Finance does, in all truth, wield a good deal of power! Yet it does so in the name and on behalf of Parliament. Still, its key activity remains that of conducting a constant supervision of the Confederation's financial management. Its task is furthermore facilitated by the Federal Audit Office to whose 125 years of existence I take this opportunity to pay tribute today.

The work of the Federal Audit Office is highly valued and I should like to seize this occasion to point out the excellent job it does not only in guaranteeing that the Confederation's financial operations are conducted properly and in compliance with the law, but also in assuring that the allotment of Federal funds is carried out efficiently and economically in the supreme interest of Switzerland's finances.

My best wishes go out to the Finance Committees, to the Joint Committee on Finance, and to the Federal Audit Office for a happy anniversary, and I invite you to join in with me in celebrating this double jubilee in honor of these tried and true high financial supervision bodies.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you.