The 2014 Swiss Ambassador’s Award for inspirational and socially responsible leadership presented to Mr. Azim H. Premji, Chairman Wipro Ltd., Mumbai, Swiss Residence, 3 December 2014

Address by Dr. Linus von Castelmur, Ambassador of Switzerland to India and Bhutan

Mr. and Mrs. Premji, dear Azim, dear Yasmeen,
Mr. and Mrs. Godrej, dear Jamshyd, dear Pheroza,
Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

It is a great privilege for me to welcome, also on behalf of my wife Françoise, such an illustrious selection of guests to this year’s Swiss Ambassador’s Award ceremony in this marvelous surrounding in the garden of the Swiss residence here in Mumbai. It is the first time since the Swiss Ambassador’s Award came into being four years ago, that the ceremony is being held in Mumbai and I am extremely pleased at the great responsiveness this event enjoys here also. As some of you might know, the Swiss Ambassador’s Award was created by my predecessor who bestowed the first two awards on the late Yash Chopra in 2010 and on Ratan Tata in 2011. The idea of the award was to honour an Indian personality for his or her significant contribution to the relationship between India and Switzerland as well as exceptional leadership qualities. After having awarded the highly respected and successful entrepreneurs Glenn Saldanha and Raju Kanoria in 2012 and 2013, respectively, it is with enormous pleasure that I confer this year’s Award on Mr. Azim Premji, Founder and Chairman of Wipro Limited, for inspirational and socially responsible leadership.

Azim Premji, ladies and gentlemen, doesn’t need any introduction. He is one of the beacons of India’s corporate world and I am particularly happy that despite his almost legendary modesty he has agreed to accept this award. An award that stands not only for the relationship between two countries, but also for values that we all agree to be laudable and exemplary, but very few people actually manage to live throughout their private and professional life. Values such as respect and tolerance, honesty and modesty, ethical and socially responsible behaviour. Values, precisely which also Mr. Premji is widely known for. To maintain such values even when reaching such entrepreneurial heights is presumably even more difficult. It does probably not befit the Ambassador of a truly republican country like Switzerland, where only the mountains can somehow be called majestic, to utter his
admiration for an empire, and having come to know the unassuming nature of Azim Premji during our interactions, he is most unlikely to consider his company an empire or even regard himself as an industrial king or emperor. But what he has achieved with his company is simply breathtaking.

It is exactly his visionary and inspirational leadership and his endeavours to find and provide solutions for widespread demands of our society that remind me of the unique entrepreneurs of 19th century Switzerland, when my country was far less developed than urban India today. I do by no means want to place a fine and sophisticated gentleman of the 21st century into a time 150 years back. But what Azim Premji and his – do I dare say “Swiss” entrepreneurial forefathers? – have in common and distinguishes him as much from his contemporary environment as they distinguished themselves from theirs, is the understanding of the value of knowledge and know-how and the ability to tap the talent of motivated people and inspire them to give their best while rewarding them accordingly.

Why do I make this comparison, you might wonder? Many of you know Switzerland and nourish a great deal of admiration for my country. This makes me and my fellow country people very proud. But when you experience the constant clockwork perfection of almost everything you see, it is easy to forget, that not so long ago Switzerland was such a poor country that many people were forced to emigrate. At the same time, however, our industry kick-started thanks to pioneers with the same entrepreneurial DNA as Azim Premji. Many of the large Swiss multinational companies like Nestlé, Novartis or Clariant, our partners tonight, were founded in or have their roots going back to that time. Over time, they have risen to become world leaders and are among the most innovative and competitive actors in their respective fields. And above all, they have remained among the most popular employers in Switzerland for many decades now. People really like working for these companies, and I could name many more. And this is also exactly the case with Wipro. If you like me have had the opportunity to visit the Wipro campus in Bangalore, you would certainly agree with me that one can literally breathe not only the satisfaction and motivation of the employees there, but also their entrepreneurial spirit and – I hope I describe this correctly – the authentic feeling of being a useful and important part of something big and valuable. To instill such a sentiment of self-fulfilment can only derive from inspirational leadership.

But the similarities of Azim Premji with our 19th century pioneers don’t stop there. Like him they advocated and promoted education and especially higher education. Their efforts resulted in the establishment of the two Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology, in 1855 in Zurich and in 1890 in Lausanne, today two of the finest universities worldwide and which are at the forefront of research and innovation. These great men also didn’t keep all their wealth to themselves. They founded charitable trusts active in many fields like again education, science, arts, social
housing etc. in order to contribute to the wellbeing of large parts of the – often underprivileged – population and the development of the society as a whole. Just like Azim Premji.

And this is, ladies and gentlemen, the great appeal of such a unique personality like Azim Premji for us Swiss. The values he represents are certainly cherished and shared all across the globe, but there are probably not too many places where they are so engrained into people’s mentality as in Switzerland. This would, one assumes, explain to a certain extent why Wipro has a considerable footprint in Switzerland with currently more than 400 employees there, thus contributing to growth and the creation of employment also in my home country. I would say Wipro and Switzerland definitely deserve each other. A perfect match and I wish you and us many successful and fruitful years to come for Wipro and in Switzerland.

And I can assure you, Mr. Premji, that the CEO of Switzerland Global Enterprise, the Swiss trade and investment promotion agency, Mr. Daniel Küng, who is also present here tonight, is very grateful for Wipro’s growing presence in Switzerland. If you can discover two brightly sparkling eyes when hearing the name Wipro tonight, those would be his. And through the Swiss Business Hub in Mumbai, he is also one of the happy partners of this event. And since I am talking of our partners, allow me to also mention Switzerland Tourism who would be very happy to see many of you, dear guests, to indulge in vacation activities in this season’s 150th anniversary of winter tourism in Switzerland. I am very thankful, that again this year we had generous partners and I would like to thank them all – just to mention them once again: Swiss Business Hub, Nestlé, Novartis, Clariant, Switzerland Tourism. Without their contribution this event would not have been possible.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Mr. Jamshyd Godrej for having agreed to join us tonight in order to deliver the laudatory speech for Azim Premji. But before I pass on the floor to you, Jamshyd, I would like to thank you all again for showing up so numerously and sharing this memorable evening with us and especially with Mr. Premji. I wish you all a very pleasant evening.

Thank you for your attention.