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Comments on the results of the referendum of September 23 1990

A good old Swiss Compromise!

The Swiss voters (39.6% of the total electorate) rejected the proposal for Switzerland to pull out from the use of atomic energy – but instead, in opposition to the proposals of the Federal Council, and of Parliament, as well as to the energy article proposed for inclusion in the Constitution, they accepted by a clear majority the alternative proposal for a “moratorium” to suspend the construction of nuclear power stations for ten years! (They also gave their approval to a proposed revision of the law governing road traffic).

As far as the situation in respect of energy policy is concerned, this result – which some observers have described as a “semi U-turn” – reflects the dilemma in which we have been for several years. The fear of disasters arising in connection with nuclear power stations is evidently just as strong as that of the consequences of a possible renunciation of the use of such energy. The energy article for the Constitution, a version of which had been narrowly rejected by the electorate in 1983, was now accepted without a murmur. The voters thereby adjourned for ten years the definitive decision pro or contra atomic current. They have however clearly indicated the need for an energy policy directed towards a drastic reduction in consumption of energy, while at the same time furthering the use of alternative sources of energy that are friendly to the environment.

Three anti-nuclear initiatives

It was the third time since 1979 that the Swiss nation had to declare its attitude towards the future of atomic energy.

In September 1984, in the voting on the second initiative, 45% of the votes were cast in favour of the proposal to stop the construction of nuclear power stations after Leibstadt, and to refrain from replacing any existing stations which had become obsolete. Since then, the percentage of those uncompromisingly in favour of “pulling out” has risen only slightly, namely to 47.1%, even though in the meantime (in 1986) the Chernobyl catastrophe took place.

In the first voting, in 1979, when it was proposed that the construction of further nuclear power stations had to be subject to the approval of the communities (municipalities, etc.) affected, the number of votes in favour had reached the level of 8.8%. It is striking that the opposition to nuclear energy has remained constant since 1979 when broken down over the individual cantons. Out of the nine, eight had already been in the anti-nuclear camp eleven years ago, while the Canton of Argovia with its energy and industrial interests had right from the

start been favourably disposed towards nuclear energy – and still has that attitude.

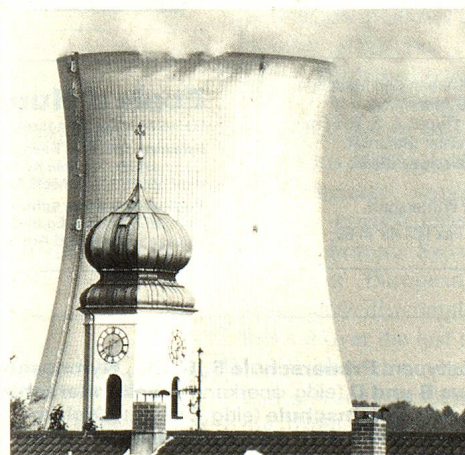
A difficult decision

Various reasons have led to a majority of 7.5% (54.6% compared with 47.1% for “pulling out”) in favour of the moratorium. Firstly, the subject of nuclear energy and of the dangers connected with it is very difficult for the layman to understand. Secondly, the voters during the electoral campaign which had been conducted by both sides in an emotional manner, were so further confused by the mass of statements and counter-statements that many of them who were opposed to nuclear energy or sceptical about the issue, decided in favour of the compromise – or did not cast their vote at all.

The Future

In the immediate future the situation is unlikely to undergo much change, as the cancellation of the Kaiseraugst and Graben projects, even if the moratorium itself is annulled, will mean that no new nuclear power stations can be put into operation before 2005.

As the need for electricity will continue to increase and a widespread utilisation of alternative sources of energy cannot be achieved overnight one has cause to fear that



Nuclear power station Leibstadt: the cooling tower. (Photo: Keystone)

WHAT IT WAS ALL ABOUT

● The popular initiative for abandoning atomic energy. This initiative demanded the prohibition of new plants for production of atomic energy, also that existing power stations should be closed down. For the Federal Council and Parliament, such a course was seen as unacceptable.

● The popular initiative to stop the building of nuclear power stations (the “moratorium”). This demanded that for ten years no new nuclear power stations or reactors for heating should be authorised. Federal Council and Parliament rejected this initiative.

● The energy article in the Constitution. Federal Council and Parliament recommended the adoption of the energy article as the basis for a safe, economical and ecologically beneficial supply of energy. Measures are proposed for a frugal and rational use of energy.

● Road Traffic Law: the revision of this law brings about various improvements, e.g., for greater road safety. Voting was needed only against the increase in vehicle width to 2.5 metres.

Switzerland will become increasingly dependent on imports of current from atomic power plants in France.

The definitive decision for or against nuclear current has thus been postponed, but not cancelled. An optimal solution to the energy problem, whatever form it takes, can only be achieved when opponents and supporters of atomic energy have ended their present trench warfare and can devote themselves to the “order of the day” in the field of energy policy.

Revision of the Road Traffic Law

This revision comprised a series of unopposed regulations regarding safety, pollution control etc. It was necessary to have resort to a referendum only in respect of the proposed increase of the maximum width of vehicles by 20 centimetres to a total of 2.5 metres. As expected, this proposal was with 52.8% votes in favour approved by a small majority. Opponents to the proposal feared that heavy traffic would be diverted to secondary roads, necessitating a widening of these. That fear was not necessarily justified, as the cantons are already entitled to authorise a maximum width of 2.3 metres. With this new regulation, which takes effect from January 1, 1991, Switzerland will have shown its willingness to conform with European standards where possible. WIL