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The European Economic Area is a great end-of-century opportunity for Switzerland in Europe". The words of Federal Councillor Jean-Pascal Delamuraz, head of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, in an interview with Swiss Review.

Swiss Review: The European Economic Area does not give EFTA countries – of which Switzerland is one – a share in decision-making in the development of European Community law. How can the government and the parliament recommend approval of an international agreement which makes Switzerland into a kind of satellite?

Jean-Pascal Delamuraz: In their assessment of the treaty, the government and the parliament are well aware that there are a number of imperfections in it, but as a whole it is seen as favourable; it will enable us to continue with our policy of full participation in west European institutions outside the Community, and we regard the EEA as a great end-of-century opportunity for Switzerland in Europe. Without it our country would for the first time since the end of the Second World War be in a state of institutional inferiority compared with all the other countries of Europe.

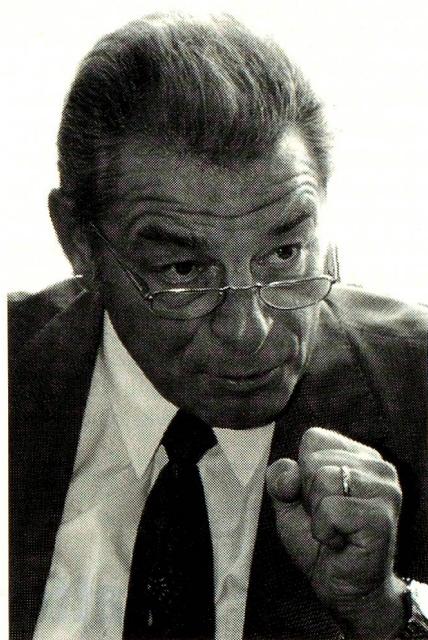
In deciding to apply for membership of the European Community the Federal Council has confused the issue. A lot of voters are now asking whether the EEA is not just a waiting-room for Community membership...

On December 6 the Swiss people will have to answer one single question: Do you wish Switzerland to become a member of the European Economic Area as from January 1, 1993: Yes or No? The present procedure will come to an end with this vote on the EEA. What happens afterwards is something which the Federal Council has sketched out by saying: We must negotiate with the Community on the possibility of Switzerland's membership. But these negotiations have not yet started; if they succeed there will then have to be a second decision by Swiss voters in a few years time. If the Federal Council had said nothing, had proposed nothing for the future, it would have been accused of not knowing how to govern – since to govern is to plan ahead.

Could you illustrate the economic advantages for Switzerland of EEA membership?

Jean-Pascal Delamuraz:

"Switzerland's European opportunity"



First of all we will have free access to this huge market for our own products, without any barriers and with the benefit of technical standards harmonised so as to avoid the present irksome administrative procedures which cost the consumer so much. But there is a lot more than this: the EEA also includes services, and Switzerland's service industry provides something like 60% of our export revenue. The fact is that if we do not join the EEA on January 1, 1993, all our activities throughout this huge market will be automatically subject to discrimination compared with those of our competitors. For example, pharmaceuticals – which at present have to be approved country by country – will in future be submitted to one EEA authority, accepted by all. If we do not join the European Economic Area, our products will still have to go through 17 approval procedures in 17 countries, which would penalise us substantially in comparison with our German or Swedish competitors.

The government and the parliament have now adjusted Swiss legislation to the law which will be in force in the EEA. Why have they not

taken account of the needs and wishes of Swiss citizens established in the EEA by maintaining the voluntary old age and disability pension scheme?

The abolition of the voluntary pension scheme is not something forced on us by the EEA. We might well have maintained it. But material and financial factors – which are always based on reciprocity – would make the operation too burdensome, and in any case the scheme would simply compete with other insurance opportunities to which in future Swiss citizens domiciled in EEA countries will have, and must have, free access. The principle of free movement of persons, including coordination of social security benefits, marks a fundamental change and makes the system which we have at present unnecessary for safeguarding legitimate personal interests.

What reasons would you put forward to persuade the Swiss Abroad to vote in favour of the EEA?

I think that for the Swiss Abroad the prosperity of the country is just as important as for our citizens living inside Switzerland. This prosperity depends on our trading capacity. Every second franc which we earn comes from abroad. And out of that second franc 75 centimes of it come from Europe. This may well be seen as a matter of life and death, and I do not think such an expression is by any means too strong. Do we want a competitive economy for our country, Yes or No? To say Yes to that is to say Yes to the EEA. And to say No is as if we had to participate in a 1993 world championship race with a car built in 1972. I think that the Swiss Abroad, who are well aware that the progress of their country and their fellow-citizens depends largely on the economy, will have a strong desire to see this momentous enterprise succeed.

I would also like to emphasise another fundamental element: By signing the European Economic Area Treaty Switzerland is not shutting itself up in a European fortress. Switzerland is not forgetting its presence in all markets outside Europe. The EEA – and I address this to my fellow-citizens who live overseas – is not a war machine created by the Europe of old against the rest of the world. It should rather be seen as the Europe of old trying to participate more effectively in international life.

Interview: PAT/RUS