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A slap for the government

The vote on five transport-related issues ended up with a fivefold Yes – but one of them was very much against the will of the cabinet and parliament. To the chagrin of transport minister Adolf Ogi, 51.9% of voters approved the Alpine Initiative which calls for all transalpine transit freight traffic to be forced from the road on to the railways by the year 2004. The initiative also bans any expansion in highway capacity in the Alps.

When the Alpine initiative was launched, largely by green and social democratic circles from the central Swiss mountainous regions in 1990, it was given little attention. Parliament and the cabinet recommended

Peter Haller

rejection, saying the compulsion for freight traffic to use the railways ran counter to free choice, and was in any case a far too extreme proposal. The cabinet's complacency in the run up to the vote was only shaken in the last two weeks by the increasing nervousness of transport minister Adolf Ogi – this manifesting itself in injudicious remarks on television which surely lost the opposing side votes.

It is very rare for an initiative to be accepted in Switzerland, and the Alpine initiative will go down in the books as a slap in the face for the government and the majority in parliament. Political scientists attribute the initiative's victory to the steady and professional cam-

paign that has been running since 1990 – with hundreds of volunteer campaign workers being recruited. Clearly the greatest support came from the central canton of Uri, through which the Gotthard road and rail transit routes pass. Here almost 88% voted in favour. The lowest level of support came from the French-language cantons which all rejected the initiative. They are little affected by transit traffic, and are largely in favour of Euro-compatibility in Swiss policies. The acceptance of the initiative does little to help the Swiss negotiating position with the EU. Ultimately, both the Swiss government, and the European Union favour freight transport by rail as a long-term aim – but the implementation of the Alpine initiative will prove difficult taking into account that Switzerland cannot cut itself off from European realities – which include much road haulage.

Paradoxically the government-sponsored heavy goods vehicle tax will most likely be used to make road haulage as

unattractive as possible. Voters clearly approved the present flat-rate tax on trucks and coaches, and also a future tax on heavy vehicles which will be dependent on mileage and/or fuel consumption. This tax is designed to make road hauliers pay for the true costs they incur in terms of road construction, road repairs, and air pollution.

A Swiss invention which was highly controversial when introduced ten years ago has obviously found a place in the hearts of the populace: the famous «Vignette» or sticker which is mandatory for vehicles using motorways. 68% voted in favour – including an increase in price from 30 to 40 francs. Ten years ago the vignette was only narrowly approved – but the fact that half the revenue from the sticker comes from foreign motorists may have encouraged many Swiss to give more overwhelming support this time round. Exceptions are the French-language cantons of Vaud and Neuchâtel which turned down the issue.

Another clear result for government policy was the 61% favour found by the revised air traffic law. Despite an expensive campaign by opponents of the revised law, no canton rejected the issue, which ties up many civil aviation loose ends. The new law will permit landing fees to be charged not only on the basis of the noise made by a plane, but also as a function of the air pollution it causes.

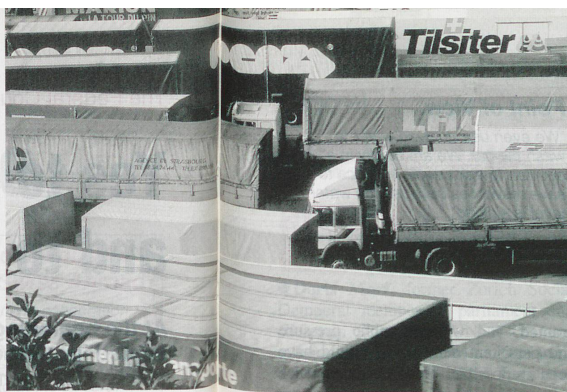
Federal referendums

June 12, 1994

- Federal decision on a new constitutional article to promote culture.
- Federal decision on revising the constitutional article on nationality law (easier naturalisation for young foreign residents).
- Federal law making Swiss troops available for peacekeeping operations (blue helmets).

against Switzerland as a reliable contracting party.

Domestically, the rift – whether imagined or real – between the German and French-speaking Swiss has been re-accentuated after the EEA vote of December 1992 when the two language groups voted in near-diametrically opposed fashion. Economics minister Jean-Pascal Delamuraz' anti-German-Swiss outburst was also reflected by the French-speaking press – but in fact it is quite normal for the French and German-speaking Swiss not to see eye to eye on transport questions. And ultimately, the very low voter turnout percentage in the French-speaking cantons – in the low thirties for the most part – shows how little importance voters attached to the initiative-before the event. Peter Haller



Referendum results with consequences for heavy transport: Yes to the taxes, Yes to the Alpine initiative which will force transit traffic on to the rails. (Photo: Prisma)

Press review

Of the five federal referendum results of February 20, it was of course the Yes to the popular initiative to protect the Alps against transit traffic which inspired Swiss political observers. Generally speaking, press comment stressed the negative consequences which this decision could have on Switzerland's negotiations with the European Union, as well as the difference in attitude between the French and German speakers.

CORRIERE DEL TICINO

"Swiss voters once again wanted to confirm their freedom to decide in a matter as important as environmental protection – in independence from the Federal Council, the political parties and the rest of Europe".

Blick

"No question about it: the relationship between French and German speakers in Switzerland has suffered another blow. As in the case of the EEA, the French speakers – more open to the world – find themselves dominated by the German speakers. The gulf between the two is wider than ever".

Tages-Anzeiger

"Apparently the majority of Swiss voters lay more weight on this protection than on their fear of possible retaliatory measures from Brussels. But it is

precisely from this European policy aspect that the overwhelming No by the French speakers must be seen, particularly since they approved the other transport issues more or less clearly – which is rather unusual".

Neue Zürcher Zeitung

"There is still no clarity about road construction and about what will happen in the next ten years until the final transfer of trans-Alpine goods transport to the railways. Such an unsatisfactory situation could have been prevented by an acceptable counter-proposal: when the Federal Council and the parliamentary majority refused this, they were not displaying much political acumen. The uncertainties which have now been created should be dispelled as quickly as possible by a clear policy. In the case at hand, this means not waiting for ten years but introducing market economy measures quickly to shift goods transport from road to rail".

LE NOUVEAU QUOTIDIEN

"The February 20 result is another nationalist vote. This text makes out that Switzerland can decide its transport policy all on its own, without prior consultation with its neighbours who are directly concerned. Worse, by actually defying them. A majority blinded by the green glow of the initiative has once again swallowed the illusion. Which is not without its cynical side: where will the heavy lorries thus diverted from Switzerland cross if not through the Austrian and French valleys?"

TRIBUNE DE GENÈVE

"The Swiss have voted for progress and not for isolationist withdrawal, as some commentators will surely be tempted to present it. Everybody, or almost, is agreed on the necessity of developing rail transport to reduce the nuisance of heavy vehicles. The only real argument opposing the initiative was the European one: a Yes to the initiative would make our position in the negotiations with Brussels more fragile, it was said – particularly in French-speaking Switzerland. This may well be true in the short term. But it is the long term which counts".

PAT

Referendum result

Federal decision on continuing the motorway tax

YES 1,259,313 (68.5%)
NO 579,643 (31.5%)

Federal decision on continuing the heavy traffic tax

YES 1,323,877 (72.1%)
NO 512,988 (27.9%)

Federal decision on the introduction of a heavy traffic tax depending on consumption

YES 1,221,473 (67.1%)
NO 597,673 (32.9%)

Popular initiative "to protect the Alpine region from transit traffic"

YES 954,433 (51.9%)
Cantons: AI, AR, BE, BL, BS, GL, GR, LU, NW, OW, SG, SH, SO, SZ, TG, TI, UR, ZG, ZH
NO 884,448 (48.1%)
Cantons: AG, FR, GE, JU, NE, VD, VS

Modification of the Air Traffic Law

YES 1,080,959 (65.9%)
NO 689,924 (34.1%)

Voter participation: circa 40%

Swiss blue helmets?

One of the matters which voters will have to decide on June 12 is whether Switzerland should participate with so-called blue helmets in future UN missions. We shall be considering this subject in more detail in the next issue of Swiss Review. If you would like to think it over in the meantime, you may obtain the basic German-, French- or Italian-language document "20 Arguments for Swiss Blue Helmets" from the following address:

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
Directorate for International Organisations, UNO + IO Section, CH-3003 Berne

Name: _____

First name: _____

Address: _____

Country: _____

Language: _____

Do you intend to pass on the information? (You are not obliged to answer this question). ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, by what means? _____