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Federal referendums of March 12, 1995

Agriculture and curbing expenditure

Three of the four subjects to be voted upon on March 12, 1995, concern agriculture, while the fourth is purely financial.

Voters will have to decide on whether to include a new article on agriculture in the federal constitution, on compulsory solidarity contributions and on whether to relax the milk quotas.

Multifunctional agriculture

The constitutional article proposed by parliament will not change anything in today's agricultural policy. It is a coun-

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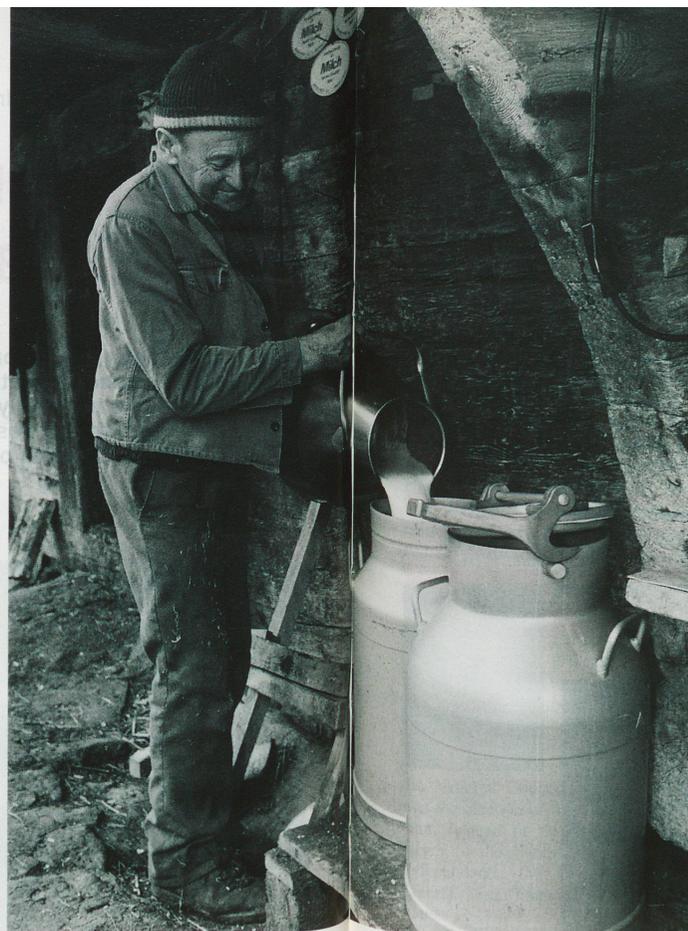
ter-proposal to a popular initiative which the Swiss Farmers' Union withdrew last November precisely in order to support this counter-project.

The proposal confirms the change in agricultural policy undertaken by the government in 1992 and described in its 7th report on agriculture. The latter will in future be multifunctional; it must not only guarantee supply to the whole population but it must also contribute to

sustainable use of life support systems, to maintaining rural landscapes and to preventing migration to urban areas. Agricultural production must at the same time respect the environment and take account of market requirements.

The proposed constitutional article also lists a series of measures which the federal government may take «to promote farm businesses wishing to cultivate the soil». These may include supporting farmers who produce crops with ecology in mind and making «direct payments» (contributions which are not linked to production and are therefore compatible with the GATT's Uruguay Round agreement) to boost farmers' incomes.

This draft constitutional article will undoubtedly attract very wide support, not only amongst the some 4% of the population who at present live from Swiss agriculture but also amongst voters interested in politics and economics. Opposition will come from those who want agricultural policy to take an even more ecological stance. Two other popular initiatives also want a similar change in direction: one, entitled «Farmers and consumers, for an agriculture in accordance with nature», was deposited in 1991; the second was deposited last June with the title «For reasonable food prices and ecological



farms». These will be submitted to voters at a later date.

Solidarity contributions

Switzerland's new agricultural policy aims at the gradual replacement of interventionism by the law of the market in the primary sector. It wants farmers to rely less on the state and to cooperate to a greater extent. Both parliament and government would like to compel producers to pay solidarity contributions to agricultural organisations in order to finance cooperative measures. They are proposing that agricultural legislation should be modified in this sense. But this project does not appeal to the Swiss Association of Small-Scale and Medium-Scale Farmers, which has collected the 50,000 signatures necessary to require a referendum on the principle of these compulsory solidarity contributions.

Dealing with milk quotas is an important aspect of the Federal Council's agricultural policy. But small-scale and medium-scale farmers have taken up arms against the government's proposal. (Photo: Keystone)

Such solidarity contributions should not be confused with the membership fees of agricultural organisations. They would be used for publicity campaigns and generally for marketing products. They are based on the principle by which a campaign in favour of potatoes, for example, would benefit all potato producers whether or not they were members of the organisation which launched the campaign. This would mean that the Federal Council would be able to compel producers not affiliated to the organisation in question to pay

solidarity contributions provided that the following conditions were fulfilled:

- that the cooperative measures benefit all producers;
- that they are aimed in the first place at adapting production to market requirements and promoting the application of ecological agricultural methods, as well as promoting the sale and quality of products serving the interests of agriculture in general;
- that more than two-thirds of producers (accounting for more than half of total agricultural surface or production) are affiliated to the agricultural organisations in question.

Transferable milk quotas

Small-scale farmers and partisans of biological agriculture are at the origin of the referendum against the liberalisation of the milk market approved by parliament last March. They do not agree that milk producers should in future be able to sell or rent out their milk quotas freely without any conditions linked to ecology. They believe that large-scale farms will be able to acquire such quotas freely and produce as much milk as they want to, while small-scale farms will not be able to increase their quotas because they lack the resources. In this way liberalisation of the milk market would benefit industrial-type stockbreeding to the detriment of small family farms more respectful of the environment and of the animals themselves.

The introduction of the possibility of transferring quotas is the keystone of the modification of the Federal Council decision on the dairy industry favoured by parliament and the government. It is also a stumbling block in its way.

This revision constitutes the first step in a change of policy which aims to come nearer to the actual situation in the Swiss dairy market. With its 50,000 producers this represents one-third of agricultural income. The Federal Council's initial measure, taken in September 1993, was to reduce the price paid to the producer by ten centimes per litre of milk. It now intends to remodel dairy legislation completely in 1997/98.

This adjustment of milk quotas to market conditions is accompanied by a series of measures intended to prevent abuses. Transferred quotas may not be transferred a second time within two years, limits on transfers are laid down according to farm size and the quotas of mountain regions may not be transferred to farms situated elsewhere.

Federal referendums

March 12, 1995

- Federal Assembly counter-proposal to the popular initiative «For an environment-friendly and competitive agricultural industry»
- Modification of the 1988 federal decision on the dairy industry
- Modification of the federal law on agricultural
- Federal decision on curbing expenditure

June 25, 1995

Subjects not yet decided

November 26, 1995 (to be held only if absolutely necessary)

Subjects not yet decided

Federal elections

October 22, 1995

General elections for the National Council

Curbing expenditure

The fourth federal referendum on March 12, 1995, is the latest in a series of proposals – which started in 1993 – to restructure the federal finances. It is part of the same package as the reduction in the subsidy on domestic cereals approved by voters last September. This time it is a matter of curbing expenditure directly, i.e. of approving an instrument which makes it more difficult for parliament to take decisions involving extra spending. This procedure for limiting expenditure is not new: Switzerland already used it in the 1950s and between 1975 and 1979, and on both occasions voters gave their assent.

The draft to be submitted to the people and the cantons on March 12 has the object of including in the federal constitution a provision by which any legislative enactment involving lump-sum expenditure of over Sfr. 20 million or periodic expenditure of over Sfr. 2 million would require a majority of all members of both houses (101 in the National Council and 24 in the Council of States). At present a majority of those members present suffices.

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Information on cassettes

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