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An agricultural No, a financial Yes

In the federal referendums of March 12, Swiss voters rejected the three agricultural proposals which were put to them, but they approved the brake on expenditure. At 37% participation was the lowest for four years.

French-speaking Switzerland again voted on its own. In all six cantons there was a Yes vote for the constitutional article on agriculture, while the dairy industry change was approved by four cantons and the solidarity contribution bill by three cantons.

The new draft constitutional article on agriculture was meant to replace the present provisions, which have formed the basis of agricultural policy since the Second World War. It was a counter-project to a popular initiative – since withdrawn – by the Swiss Farmers' Union and would have inscribed in the constitution the multi-functional character of agriculture. It was rejected by 50.8% of voters and by 14 cantons.

The modification of the 1988 federal decision on the dairy industry would have allowed transfer of milk quotas. This relaxation, which was fought by

the Association for the Protection of Small-Scale and Medium-Scale Farmers, was rejected by nearly two votes to one.

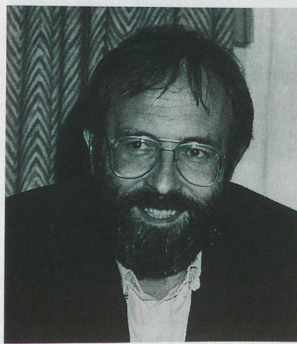
The modification of the federal law on agriculture, which was aimed at making solidarity contributions compulsory in order to adapt production to market requirements, was also rejected by one in two voters.

In contrast, there was an enthusiastic welcome for the draft constitutional article putting a brake on expenditure. This was approved by 83% of voters and all cantons. In future a majority of members of both houses of parliament – and no longer a majority of those present – will be required for one-off expenditure of more than Sfr. 20 million or recurrent expenditure of more than Sfr. 2 million.

PAT



The "losers". Melchior Ehrler, head of the Swiss Farmers' Union: "We were unable to convince voters of what we wanted. The result will make farmers even more wary of politics". (Photos: Keystone)



The "winners". Ruedi Baumann, co-president of the Association for the Protection of Small-Scale and Medium-Scale Farmers: "The three-fold No is not directed against farmers but is a rejection of the old agricultural policy".



A bio-farmer in Canton Berne. The three-fold No on March 12 should swing Swiss agricultural policy in his direction.

Press review

Many newspaper columns were devoted to the lessons of the three-fold No to the government's agricultural proposals. Most commentators are of the opinion that agricultural reform should be speeded up.

Neue Zürcher Zeitung

Agriculture should develop in an ecological direction increasingly and more quickly while becoming much more market-oriented. These are the signals sent by the very close vote against the agricultural article. But the signals remain unclear. For it is not easy to distinguish from the unholy alliance behind the referendum whether voters were more impressed by the call for increased competition, entrepreneurship and EU-compatible lower prices or that for radical bio-production.

LUZERNER NEUESTE NACHRICHTEN

The referendum results are a defeat for the butter, cheese and milk barons. Together with their parties they did everything possible in both the Council of States and the National Council to prevent government benefits being linked in any way to ecological provisions. If only a few small steps had been made in this direction – for example, a duty to declare for agricultural products – the constitutional article at least would have been less open to attack.

Der Bund

The powerlessness of parliament as well as the indecisive policy of Agriculture Minister Delamuraz deserved what they got. It is now up to them to take quick action on elementary demands for an eco-certificate in exchange for direct payments, a comprehensive duty to declare and incentive charges on auxiliary materials.

L'Impartial

In truth the results are not a real disavowal of the government: agricultural policy reform is in progress, and its objectives have not been put back into question. This was rather a matter of testing the wind – but nevertheless a very good lesson.

Die Ostschweiz

The weekend's results showed how badly the Farmers' Union and its centre-right lobbyists stitched up the proposals in parliament. All attempts to move agriculture in a more effective green direction sunk in the political quagmire.

Tages-Anzeiger

The power of the traditional farmers' representatives and their Union in federal politics has been broken. It is true that they still have their say in parliament, and the Council of States in particular lends an ear to them. But fortunately voters are no longer playing along.

Nouvelliste et Feuille d'Avis du Valais

Does this mean that French-speaking cantons, which accepted the article, are less green and more miserly? Not at all. As usual they are sensitive to the "foreign policy" component of the proposed package, i. e. the Gatt perspective.

Giornale del Popolo

The Federal Council has not succeeded in convincing voters of its serious intention to subject agriculture to a face lift. This is partly due to the fact that the referendum package put to voters was weighed down by two cumbersome issues: changing the decision on the dairy industry and introducing compulsory solidarity contributions. These two proposals made voters suspicious of new bureaucratic red tape and even abuse.

Blick

The verdict is clear: now a completely new agricultural policy must come which finally takes account of the needs of consumers and taxpayers.

PAT

Commentary

The voters' verdicts in the federal referendums of March 12 sent out an important political signal. They showed a desire for greater agricultural reform and a return to balanced federal budgets.

The huge Yes vote to curb expenditure is first and foremost an encouragement to the government to pursue with determination its structural budget reform policy. It is also a vote of appreciation to Finance Minister Otto Stich for his perseverance, combined with a warning to parliament to stop dithering.

The triple No to the agricultural policy proposals is a shot across the bows for the agricultural lobby. The times have passed when farmers could feed at a trough replenished by the government and consumers. This was a natural follow-up to three other such warnings: the No to the reform of the sugar industry in 1986, the near success of an initiative by small-scale farmers in 1989 and the No to viticulture reform five years ago. Switzerland's traditional

Referendum results

Constitutional article on agriculture (Counter-proposal to the popular initiative "For an environment-friendly and competitive agricultural industry")

YES 835,051 (49.2%)

Cantons: AI, FR, GE, JU, LU, NE, OW, TG, VD, VS

NO 864,871 (50.8%)

Cantons: AG, AR, BE, BL, BS, GL, GR, NW, SG, SH, SO, SZ, TI, UR, ZH, ZG

Modification of the federal decision on the dairy industry

YES 619,779 (36.6%)

NO 1,077,135 (63.4%)

Modification of the federal law on agriculture

YES 568,886 (33.6%)

NO 1,125,183 (66.4%)

Federal decision on curbing expenditure

YES 1,387,556 (83.4%)

All cantons

NO 277,816 (16.6%)

Voter participation: 37%

agricultural policy now seems to be opposed on a wide front. The Swiss have had enough of their over-protected and hyper-subsidised agriculture. They want farmers to be more respectful of nature, and they prefer small family enterprises producing healthier food at lower prices – a type of agriculture which is more in tune with the mood of consumers.

The policy which the government is trying to put in place at present does go in that direction. The agricultural reform process began three years ago under the dual pressure of domestic dissatisfaction and international trade liberalisation.

Swiss voters did not say No three times to the reform process but to the old agricultural policy and the country's agricultural mandarins. This is why, in spite of the triple No, Berne should continue its reform of Swiss agricultural policy and even go faster. The government is now promising to strengthen the ecological dimension of the reform process. This is just what voters want!

Pierre-André Tschanz