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Information hiccoughs

More freedom – less clarity

Many of our compatriots abroad are jubilating because in October they will for the first time be able to take part in federal elections by post without leaving their homes. But after the initial enthusiasm had worn off many of them asked themselves with some slight panic which parties and candidates they should vote for.

Hold on though: this is a problem not only for Swiss Abroad entitled to vote. Here at home it is not always easy to choose either. At any rate it is more difficult than it used to be. For there was a time – in many cantons at

momentum. The search for compromise – so greatly prized – is indeed in the good old Swiss tradition, but it requires patience and effort, qualities which are less often found today than they used to be.

but daily reality is made by people, and people are contradictory.

In the general hubbub the difficulty that “ordinary” domestic voters have in keeping a sense of direction is comprehensible. The old barriers between the parties are disappearing, particularly the religious ones. They are being replaced by others which reflect reality from a more or less pragmatic point of view.

People who live abroad are faced with even greater problems. Beyond our frontiers it is almost impossible to follow events within them with the re-

Giuseppe Rusconi

least – when it was family tradition which was decisive. If the grandfather was a radical so was the father; and then the son; and then his son too. The party manifesto counted for hardly anything. The main thing was that the banner of the victorious party could be hoisted on election night. Personalities were more important, and candidates could build on a loyal and devoted following. This was also true for many Swiss Abroad. In Ticino, for example, there were the “homecomings of emigrants” who at the cost of the party and in the name of tradition, gratitude and values returned to vote.

Today things are very different. Urbanisation, increased mobility, a trend towards the small family unit, a high level of education, the weakening concept of authority, the spread of uncertainty and protest have lessened the weight of tradition almost everywhere in the country. Those who actually vote in elections and referendums – for scepticism about politics in general has risen – do this out of a belief in their own decision-making capabilities. Binding party discipline hardly exists any more.

The electorate is flooded by publicity not only from the parties but also from the individual candidates. This personification of politics is the result of the mass media “hying” information. Another European phenomenon has also appeared in Switzerland: division between a left block and a right block on either side of a centre which is losing



As this issue went to press the election campaign posters of the parties were still at the design stage, but election publicity was already appearing in the Swiss-German newspapers. The SVP and the SP were the first to woo the electorate. (Photo: Michael Stahl)

On the other hand it is becoming rather difficult to make a clear distinction between the parties. Particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall many of them have taken up the cause of liberalism; and the word “social” is used by (almost) all of them. On some subjects there seems to reign a general consensus, even when it has no ideological sense. This seems to be in contradiction to the block thinking mentioned above –

quired sense of continuity. Added to this is the difficulty in classifying Swiss parties on the basis of their names, which are often different from foreign parties having similar objectives. With the information contained in the Swiss Review we can overcome these difficulties to a certain extent, but the gap between Swiss Abroad voters and domestic ones can never be completely bridged.

None of this should be taken as discouragement or as a call to refrain from voting in October's elections. The intention is much rather to point out some of the problems with which the electorate both at home and abroad is today faced. Such problems should not prevent anyone from expressing their opinion. Voting is not only a right, but also an obligation. And it gives the Swiss Abroad an opportunity to increase their influence in Swiss politics. ■