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Languages at the heart of the debate

On March 10, 1996, Swiss voters will decide on five subjects. The constitutional article on languages is the most important, but decisions will also have to be made on the transfer of a municipality from one canton to another and on three economic matters.

The Federal Council has the twofold aim of strengthening the position of the linguistic minorities and improving the relationship between the four cultural and linguistic communities of Switzerland. For this reason in 1991

Pierre-André Tschanz

– the Confederation's 700th anniversary year – it put forward a new constitutional article on languages. But right from the outset the parliamentary debate highlighted a number of problems and dangers for linguistic concord in the country, and in the end considerable imagination had to be used to agree on a text which satisfied at least one of the requirements at the origin of the whole enterprise: safeguarding Romansh.

Federal referendums

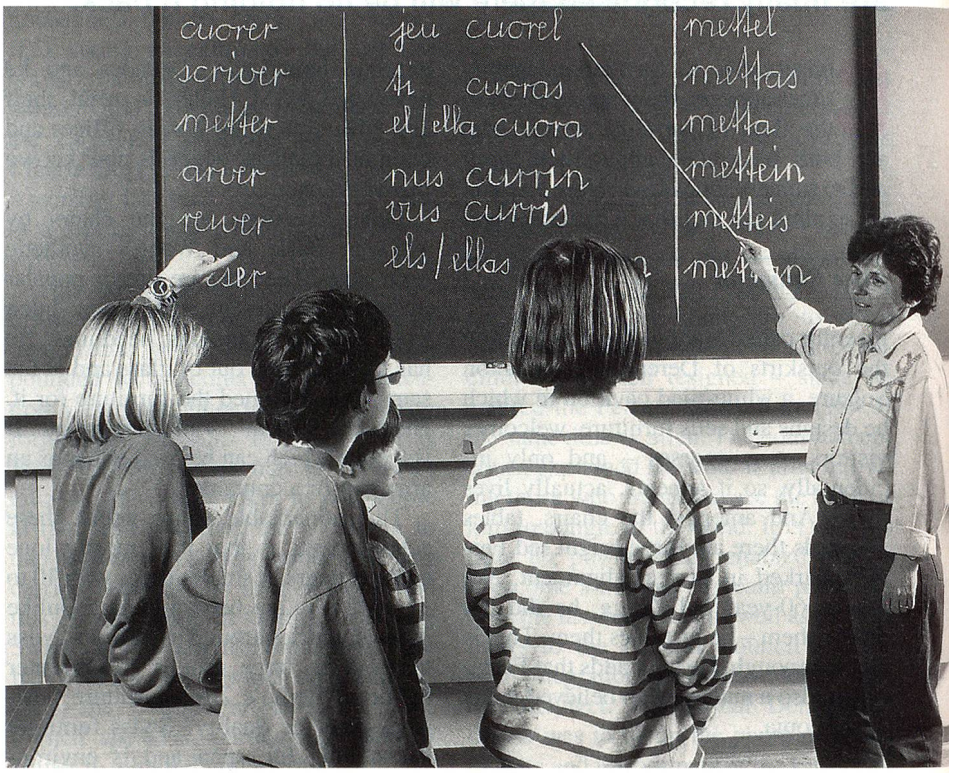
March 10, 1996

- Federal Decision on the revision of the language article in the federal constitution
- Federal Decision on the transfer of the Bernese municipality of Vellerat to Canton Jura
- Federal Decision on the abolition of cantonal responsibility for the acquisition of the personal equipment of military personnel
- Federal Decision on the abolition of the federal obligation to buy distilling equipment and to take responsibility for hard liquor
- Federal Decision on the abolition of federal subsidies for railway station car park facilities

June 9, 1996
Subjects not yet decided

September 22, 1996
Subjects not yet decided

December 1, 1996
Subjects not yet decided



The new language article is intended to promote Romansh. (Photo: Keystone)

Improved status for Romansh

The new draft article 116 of the constitution (see box) raises Romansh to the rank of an official language in relations between the federal government and the Romansh-speaking population – which the last federal census showed to be now no more than 0.6% of the people of Switzerland, i.e. hardly 40,000.

The article also provides for federal support for efforts by the cantons of Grisons and Ticino to safeguard and promote Romansh and Italian. Another innovation is that the federal government and the cantonal authorities should encourage understanding and exchange between the linguistic communities.

Transfer of a municipality

The federal constitution guarantees the existence and the territory of the cantons. This is why it is necessary for the voters of the country as a whole to approve the transfer of a municipality from one canton to another. In consequence, in the next set of federal referendums voters will be asked to ratify the transfer of the municipality of

Art. 116 (new)

[1] German, French, Italian and Romansh are the national languages of Switzerland.
[2] The Confederation and the Cantons shall encourage understanding and exchange between the linguistic communities.
[3] The Confederation shall support the efforts made by the Cantons of Grisons and Ticino to safeguard and promote Romansh and Italian.
[4] German, French and Italian are declared to be the official languages of the Confederation. Romansh is the official language for relations between the Confederation and Romansh-speaking citizens. The details shall be determined by law.

Vellerat from Berne to Jura. The two cantons concerned agree on the matter, and the voters of both of them approved the transfer at the beginning of last year. Vellerat is a municipality of 70 inhabitants and 205 hectares. In all the referendums which led up to the creation of Canton Jura it voted for the new canton and has not ceased to demand transfer to it ever since – although the procedure set up at the time did not allow it. It is now merely a question of approving a transfer which is desired by all those directly concerned.

Three economic measures

In 1994 the Federal Council put forward for the third time a list of measures to balance the federal budget. Last year parliament accepted part of these proposals – and in particular three measures each of which requires a constitutional amendment. This is why the people and the cantons must decide upon them on March 10. The three taken together should save the federal budget a little over Sfr. 40 million a year.

The first would authorise centralised purchase in future of all personal equipment for military personnel by the Group for Armament Technology and Procurement. The abolition of cantonal responsibility would permit savings of at least Sfr. 15 million for the federal government because the present decentralised acquisition procedure makes such equipment more expensive (small-scale orders to less competitive small suppliers).

The second measure would abolish the Federal Alcohol Administration's obligation to buy distilling equipment and take responsibility for hard liquor. This would save at least Sfr. 3.5 million. The third measure would abolish federal subsidies for railway station car park facilities – which would save another Sfr. 24 million.

As we go to press, the five subjects to be put to voters on March 10 have not met with any notable opposition. ■

Results of the elections to the Council of States

In a number of cantons the first round of voting on October 22, 1995, did not determine both members of the Council of States. A second round therefore had to be held. This took place after Swiss Review 6/95 went to press. We can now give the definitive results of the Council of States election. The Liberal Democrats lost one seat in Canton Jura, the Christian Democrats lost one in Aargau and gained one in Ticino, the Social Democrats gained one in Geneva and Jura, the Swiss People's Party gained one in Aargau, the Liberal Party lost one in Geneva, and the Ticino League lost its only seat.

Liberal Democratic Party:	*17 (down 1)*
Christian Democratic Party:	*16*
Social Democratic Party:	*5 (up 2)*
Swiss People's Party:	*5 (up 1)*
Liberal Party:	*2 (down 1)*
National Association of Independents:	*1*
Ticino League:	*0 (down 1)*

The 1995 federal elections

Voting problems

Since 1992 the Swiss Abroad have been able to vote by correspondence in federal referendums and elections. There is no way of knowing exactly how many of the over 60,000 of our compatriots who have registered to exercise their right actually do so, since their votes are not counted separately. Spot checks made in the larger municipalities and cantons having central voting registers for the Swiss Abroad suggest that in referendums participation is normally 15% to 20% above the national average.

However, similar spot checks taken the first time the Swiss Abroad voted in an election – on October 22 last year – indicate that voter participation was about the same as the national average. This means that problems may have been encountered, and indeed numerous reactions from Swiss Abroad entitled to vote confirm that difficulties did arise. These were not in fact new, but they were accentuated for the elections.

In some cases those wishing to vote could not do so because they received their voting documents too late. This even happened in countries in which the postal service normally works so well that there is never any problem in voting sufficiently early. In addition, many Swiss Abroad had trouble understanding all the details about lists and candidates. Media targeting Swiss Abroad (Swiss Review, Swiss Radio International) did provide information about how to vote and about the national party landscape. But it was not possible to cover the cantonal characteristics of the various parties, nor to provide a breakdown of the number of men and women standing for election.

The Organisation for the Swiss Abroad is collecting experience gained so far with the new voting rights. It intends to approach federal, cantonal and municipal authorities with a series of concrete proposals, so that this lack of information is remedied as quickly as possible.

René Lenzin ■

Information on cassettes

Swiss Radio International is making available free of charge to Swiss Abroad audio cassettes describing referendum subjects and explaining what is at stake. If you fill in the order form beside and send it to *Swiss Radio International, Referendum Cassettes, CH–3000 Berne 15*, you will receive a cassette containing information on voting issues shortly before each referendum.

Order form:

I would like a voting-issues cassette from Swiss Radio International to be sent to me before every federal poll in:

☐ German
☐ French
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