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Under the banner of reform

Two subjects will be put to the vote on June 9: a new draft constitutional article on agriculture and a new law which is part of the ongoing reform of the government and the federal administration.

In March 1995 Swiss voters rejected three proposals on agriculture, one of which defined a new role and administrative framework for this sector. The government and parliament

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interpreted this triple No as a desire to hasten the liberalisation of agriculture and make it more ecological.

More ecological, more competitive

In consequence, the government has now worked out an agricultural reform programme entitled "Agriculture 2002", and parliament has responded to a popular initiative by drafting a new

constitutional article on agriculture. This is the result of a compromise between all those concerned and has enabled the group of ecologists, consumers and small-scale farmers to withdraw their initiative, "Farmers and Consumers - For an Agriculture in line with Nature".

The proposed constitutional article is more wide-ranging than the one rejected by voters last year. It would give the federal government the power to supplement the mutual aid which must in any case be undertaken by the agricultural sector with measures to encourage farmers cultivating the soil. To this end Berne would top up farmers' incomes by direct payments provided a number of ecological requirements were satisfied. Incentives are also planned to promote agricultural techniques which pay increased respect to the environment and animal life, a mandatory quality declaration for foodstuffs and preventive measures against abusive use of chemical and natural fertilisers.

As was the case last year, the new draft constitutional article would not change the general direction of agriculture in practical terms. On the contrary, its intention is to provide a framework for the new agricultural policy which has gradually been developed since the beginning of the decade and which aims to adjust Swiss agriculture to the requirements of both the market and ecology.

Government reform

Last October both houses of parliament approved with big majorities an initial series of measures to reform the government and the administration. But one of the changes contained in the new law - to increase the number of secretaries of state - is opposed by some right-wing groups, who have collected 72,000



More ecology in agriculture - one of the main aims of the revised constitutional article. (Photo: Keystone)

signatures against it and thus forced a referendum.

The main aims of the new law are to improve the conditions in which the government works and to increase its efficiency by freeing officials from

some of their administrative duties to allow them to concentrate on the real tasks of government. There are two important changes. The first - which gives the Federal Council sole responsibility for organising the administration (creat-

ing, abolishing, regrouping and transferring posts) - has raised no objections. However, the second - giving the Federal Council power to appoint additional secretaries of state - led to a referendum campaign by some right-

Results of the federal referendums of March 10, 1996

Regional policy and jobs come first

Less than 30% of voters turned out for the federal referendums of March 10. This very low participation was mainly due to the relatively minor importance of the decisions to be taken. Of the five subjects put to the vote only the centralisation of the purchase and maintenance of personal equipment for the military was refused, by a majority of both the people and the cantons. The new draft constitutional article on languages was approved by more than three-quarters of those voting. In general terms the results demonstrate voter support for regional policy and jobs.

• The constitutional article on languages: The change in Article 116 of the federal constitution is limited to measures aimed at supporting Romansh and Italian and encouraging exchange between the linguistic communities.

Although it took several years for parliament to make up its mind on this matter, the new text was approved comfortably by 76.1% of those voting and by all cantons. It should be said, however, that the final version did not contain anything to threaten linguistic harmony, which is very delicately balanced in Switzerland.

• Vellerat: The ratification of the transfer of this municipality of 70 inhabitants from Canton Berne to Canton Jura was approved by more than nine out of ten voters and all cantons.

• Personal equipment for the military: A majority of voters agreed with opponents of this measure which would have saved Sfr. 15 million but would have threatened the jobs of 2,000 tailors and saddlers. 56.1% voted against the centralisation of the purchase and main-

tenance of personal equipment for military personnel, with only the cantons of Basle, Geneva and Zurich in favour.

• Hard liquor: 80.8% of voters and all cantons approved the abolition of the federal obligation to buy back distilling equipment and to take responsibility for hard liquor distilled in Switzerland. This measure, also aimed at balancing the federal budget, will save about Sfr. 3.5 million a year.

• Railway station car park facilities: The third austerity measure, to abolish federal subsidies for station car parks, will produce annual savings of about Sfr. 20 million. Regional and transport policy were the main reasons for the relatively high proportion of those who said No (46% of voters and 9 cantons).

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wingers who consider this would mean useless and expensive bloating of the administration.

The maximum number of secretaries of state would be increased to ten - there are only three at present - and their job would be to assist federal councillors by lightening their tasks and taking over ministerial functions in a number of departmental or in some cases inter-departmental fields. They would also - subject to approval by the Federal Assembly - be able to represent the Federal Council before parliament.

Referendum result

Revision of the language article in one of the main aims of the revised constitutional article. (Photo: Keystone)

YES 1,046,685 (76.1%)
All cantons
NO 329,057 (23.9%)

Transfer of the Bernese municipality of Vellerat to Canton Jura

YES 1,245,363 (91.7%)
All cantons
NO 113,881 (8.3%)

Abolition of cantonal responsibility for the acquisition of the personal equipment of military personnel

YES 602,441 (43.9%)
Cantons: BL, BS, GE, ZH
NO 772,415 (56.1%)

Cantons: AG, AI, AR, BE, FR, GL, GR, JU, LU, NE, NW, OW, SG, SH, SO, SZ, TG, TI, UR, VD, VS, ZG

Abolition of the federal obligation to buy distilling equipment and to take responsibility for hard liquor

YES 1,086,041 (80.8%)
All cantons
NO 258,550 (19.2%)

Abolition of federal subsidies for railway station car park facilities

YES 737,243 (54.0%)
Cantons: AG, AI, AR, BE, BL, BS, GE, GL, GR, LU, NW, OW, SG, SO, TI, ZG, ZH
NO 630,382 (46.0%)
Cantons: FR, JU, NE, SH, SZ, TG, UR, VD, VS

Voter participation: 29.9%