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Government reform knocked out

A very definite Yes to the constitutional article on agriculture, plus a clear No to the draft law on government reform, with once again very low voter participation: that was the triple outcome of the federal referendums of June 9.

More than three out of four of those who did vote said Yes to the new constitutional article on agriculture. This is intended as a basis for the new agricultural policy and defines the role of agriculture in the future. All cantons voted in favour.

A year and a half after the rejection of the last draft constitutional article, this overwhelming approval of the new provision means that the Swiss people are now in favour of the agricultural reform policy which the government has been pursuing since 1992. As the results came in President of the Confederation and Economics Minister Jean-Pascal Delamuraz stressed his determination that the whole agricultural reform programme would be achieved by 2002.

The new constitutional article was in fact a counter-project to the popular initiative "Farmers and consumers – for an agriculture in line with nature". This was withdrawn because of it, and the same could now happen to another even more ecological popular initiative which parliament has yet to examine.

Federal Referendums

September 22, 1996

No referendums to be held

December 1, 1996

Subjects not yet decided

A clear majority of Swiss voters do not want any more secretaries of state, so they rejected the draft law reforming the government and the administration. But the three present secretaries of state remain in office. The picture shows Jakob Kellenberger (left) with Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi. (Photo: Keystone).



Commentary

So the reform of the government and the administration has been rejected. Swiss voters do not wish to discharge the Federal Council of part of their administrative tasks so that they can govern better. This refusal is hardly surprising. Once again nothing more was needed than some shrieks from a bunch of reactionaries to torpedo a project which was supported by big majorities in both houses of parliament and almost all the political parties. Paradoxically, this result provides even greater evidence of the need to reform Switzerland's political institutions.

Seven out of ten of those entitled to vote did not make use of this sovereign right in spite of the extra measures (such as extending the right to vote by correspondence) introduced to combat abstentionism. The rate of voter participation was quite simply disastrous where there was no cantonal issue at stake (such as Valais with 13.8% and Ticino with 15.8%). The abstention rate was in inverse proportion to the importance of cantonal issues. Geneva, for example,

was for once at the top of the list, with 60.1%, since everyone felt concerned by the two road projects across the end of the lake – both of which were rejected.

Last March the abstention rate was slightly greater for five federal referendums on what were perceived as minor matters. In order to remedy this disease which is eating at the roots of our semi-direct democracy a way should be found of putting to voters only important matters of principle. The new draft constitution seems to be pointing in this direction, since it would double the number of signatures required to force referendums. This would certainly be a step in the right direction, but the consultation process has brought out widespread opposition on the grounds that it would strike a blow to democratic rights.

The June 9 rejection of what was a very modest project to reform the government and the administration does not augur well. So a Herculean task awaits Swiss politicians if they are ever to persuade voters that our institutions really need reform. So please get to work without further delay – there is not much time left.

Pierre-André Tschanz

Press review

The Swiss press concentrated on the No to the law on government and administrative reform. Here are a few editorial comments from the day after the results were known.

laRegione Ticino

The definite No by the people and all the cantons except Geneva, Neuchâtel and Vaud to the law on government and administrative reform must be seen as a clear rejection of federal Berne. "Berne" was not able to show the people that it was virtually in their own interest. Not only did they not succeed in explaining the point and the importance of the reform, but those responsible took the matter too lightly and without any sign of delicate touch. They did not take any account of the lack of direction felt throughout the country and the very widespread uneasiness.

Tages-Anzeiger

If anything is ever going to move in this country those trying to introduce reform will have to put forward their views more dynamically in future. Reserve may be a virtue, but sometimes passion is more convincing. In politics too.

Basler Zeitung

The attempt to renovate was wrecked against widespread mistrust because the hierarchy at the second highest level of government was not clearly enough defined. It was left hanging in a sort of vacuum between the top rank (the Federal Council) and the heads of the civil service.

Bieler Tagblatt

Switzerland sees no reason to change its system of government – even though, born in 1848, it is no longer that young. After the definite No to this smallest of all possible variants of government reform it is not likely that the subject will come back onto the agenda so very soon. The mistrust of the Swiss voter is too great.

JOURNAL DE GENEVE

To understand this result it must also be analysed from the point of view of the disastrous sclerosis abroad in Switzerland whose only effect is to keep things as they are. The refusal of the people of Canton Jura, who are usually ahead in this field, to give foreigners the right to be elected and that of several cantons to extend shop opening hours are also symptoms of a state of mind which will certainly keep the Federal Council very prudent about change. It is difficult to see how in this atmosphere there can be any moving on to the second stage of government reform now that this tiny move forward has been rejected.

Le Matin

What a fabulous slap in the face! The day after this voting weekend we have to admit that Swiss politicians have been given a snub of monumental proportions. Because politicians at all levels and voters throughout the country just cannot get through to each other. Because what the powers-that-be say no longer convinces the mind of the citizen. Because the theory of those elected no longer matches the practice of the voter. The view expressed today is a thundering "We've had enough".

PAT

Referendum result

Constitutional article on agriculture (Counter-proposal to the popular initiative "Farmers and Consumers – For an Agriculture in line with nature")

YES 1,085,793 (77.6%)

All cantons

NO 313,716 (22.4%)

Federal law on the organisation of the government and the administration

YES 544,284 (39.4%)

NO 837,390 (60.6%)

Voter participation: 30%