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The new trans-Alpine railway lines

Engineering project of the century: a vast challenge

In 1992 Swiss voters said Yes to the new trans-Alpine railways. The Federal Council has now decided how this work of the century will be carried out.

A hundred years ago the construction of the St. Gotthard tunnel linked Switzerland to the southern European railway network for the first time. This was a pioneering venture made possible at the cost of the lives of

Ilaria Bignasci

many immigrant labourers, but it gave a valuable stimulus to Switzerland's economic development. Today we are facing a similar challenge. AlpTransit is the name of the game. Years of preparation, projects and discussions were followed by a referendum to block the proposal, and a popular vote in favour in 1992 finally launched this huge undertaking.

Feet of clay?

After dozens of studies, expert reports and counter-proposals, the government is finally ready to put the practical implementation of the engineering project of the century before parliament. But still there are doubts. Is it possible that the whole idea has feet of clay?

Switzerland's geographical position – at the very heart of Europe – gives it an irresistible attraction for the international transport of goods between the north and south of the continent. Thousands of heavy trucks criss-cross the Swiss valleys and plains bringing with them their inevitable noise and pollution. That is why our country has erected barriers to protect itself. Heavy traffic is prohibited at night and on Sundays, and transit is allowed only for lorries weighing a maximum of 28 tonnes when loaded. In addition, a popular initiative accepted two years ago by voters provides that by the year 2004 all goods traffic passing through Switzerland will

have to go by rail. In an agreement reached with the European Union, Switzerland has promised to provide a rapid rail link so that this objective may be achieved.

Downsizing the project

AlpTransit would satisfy all these requirements. It includes the construction of two new St. Gotthard and Lötschberg tunnels and increasing the capacity of the existing railway lines across the country. This should simultaneously reduce the time needed for the journey and ensure the integration of Switzerland into the European railway network of the future. If the challenge of AlpTransit is not accepted – and that is what is now up for discussion – we will be cut off from the rest of Europe.

Goodwill is not enough, since we have to take into account an economic and financial situation which has changed radically in the last few years. After consulting their calculators the authorities have been forced to take a draconian measure: to downsize the project of the century in order to bring its costs within an acceptable limit. The new fig-

ure mentioned in official circles is 14 billion francs. At the insistence of the Federal Council almost all cantonal proposals intended to reduce the new railways' negative impact on the environment have been rejected.

Choosing the lesser evil

Why this reduction in size? Squeezed between the high federal debt and the need to safeguard delicate national balances the government has chosen the lesser evil – from its point of view. Valais will have its Lötschberg tunnel, but with a single track. Ticino will not get the Bellinzona bypass line which it was so much hoping for. Canton Uri will not get its underground line. St. Gall will have to do without the Hirzel tunnel. And so on. We may add to all this the fact that new tax funding will be needed which will for example increase the price of petrol. For all these reasons the project may be thought of as a giant with feet of clay.

There remains one big question: will voters finally agree to the engineering project of the century for a second time? ■

