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Cover:

The pension system for a peaceful and protected twilight of life built up over the last 50 years is coming up against its financial limits and must be reformed. (Photo: Incolor)

I M P R E S S U M

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The social policy climate has become more harsh. This is shown by the increasingly tough tone of the debates which are taking place on the social responsibilities of the state. Over the past 50 years, western industrial societies have experienced a growth period in which the steady increase of economic returns has led to an equally steady rise in the prosperity of virtually the whole population. Is this now coming to an end? There are indications that this is the case.

The accelerating pace of globalisation means that an increasingly large part of the international economy is escaping from the sphere of influence of national policies – thus depriving individual countries of taxable income and workplaces. But the main problem is that the model of prosperity built up shortly before and immediately following the Second World War is now beset with financing problems due to the changing age structure of our society. These can be overcome only through increased revenue or a reduction in benefits.

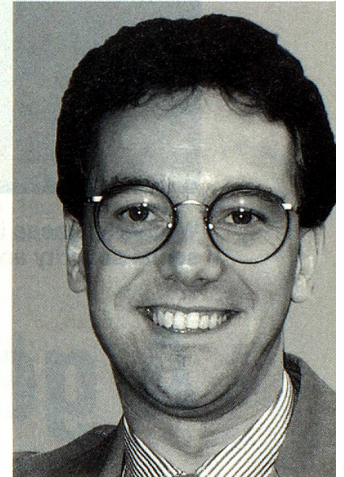
High unemployment, with its associated social costs, and the exponential growth in the price of health care suggest that we have reached the limits of what our society can finance. This is true even for rich Switzerland, where things are still going relatively well.

What is required in this situation is a debate on fundamental principles aimed at working out long-term strategies for the further development of our system of social security. How much social se-

curity can we afford, and indeed how much do we wish to afford? This is the question – at the same time banal and complex – which we must face. But unfortunately a democracy such as ours is increasingly influenced by superficial mass media which encourage short-term thinking. Serious debate relating to the medium and long term is not one of its strengths. This means that in political discussions on the future of our social security the main issues are often sidelined. In consequence, we have decided not to consider specific aspects in detail but rather to approach this subject in the form of a genuine debate on principles.

And we include an interview with Federal Councillor and Social Affairs Minister Ruth Dreifuss on the government's long-term strategies.

Berlin sociology professor Wolf Lepenies recently stated that western societies have lost long-term orientation and that policy horizons are now measured only by terms of office or of legislature. It is greatly to be hoped that we will be able to refute this diagnosis, at least with respect to the future arrangement of the welfare state. Otherwise the least we can say with certainty is that a period in Swiss history will come to an end – that of social peace.



René Lenzin

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