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Federal referendums of June 8, 1997

Sweeping majorities and a united Switzerland

Switzerland has rarely presented itself as so united as in the federal referendums of June 8. With sweeping majorities of three to one and more, voters rejected the two popular initiatives submitted to them and approved abolition of the gunpowder monopoly. And for once all the cantons voted the same way. Voter participation was relatively low, at just under 35%.

74% said NO to the popular initiative "Negotiations on joining the EU: let the people decide". This was launched by the Swiss Democrats and the Ticino League following the lodging of Switzerland's application to join the European Union in May 1992, but it was not supported by the anti-Europeans grouped around Zurich National Councillor Christophe Blocher. This meant that those who launched the initiative – which was aimed at transferring from the government to the people the right to

decide on whether to start negotiations with Brussels to join the EU – did not succeed in turning it into a referendum on European integration.

The Social Democrats were given an even more savage blow with the defeat of their popular initiative "For a prohibition on exporting war materials", which was found acceptable by less than one voter in four – with 77.3% voting NO. Although the Social Democrats had the pacifists and people devoted to third-world causes on their side, they relinquished the support of the trades unions – and this turned out to be fatal. The question of jobs played a decisive role in the broad front which formed against the Social Democrat initiative. In any case, the government and parliament had undermined it by strengthening existing legislation controlling the export of war materials and "dual use" goods.

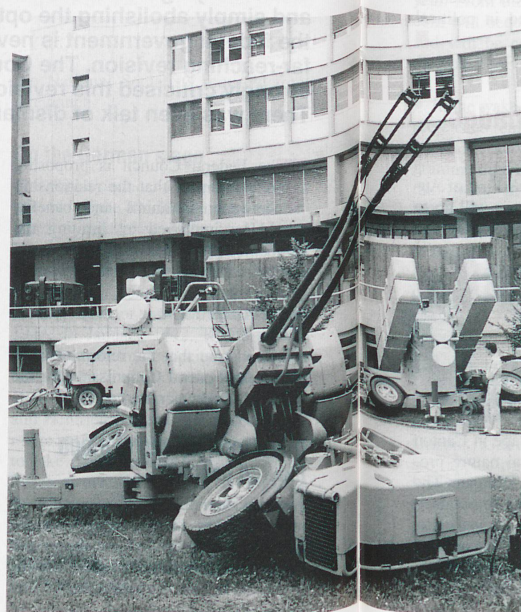
82.2% of voters supported the desire of the government and parliament to abolish the gunpowder monopoly, which was set up almost 150 years ago when federal Switzerland was founded. **PAT**

Commentary

In the federal referendums of June 8, Swiss voters rejected the views of extremists of two different colours, and at the same time they for once gave the government and parliament their trust. The results themselves were expected, but not the enormous majorities. The nationalist right-wing and the pacifist left-wing both looked very small the morning after.

The Swiss Democrats and the Ticino League were hoping that the supposed anti-European integration reflex of Swiss voters would deal a death blow to

the government's policy on that issue. But the reflex was just not there. Swiss voters showed that they understood the alarmist character of the initiative and the harmful consequences that a success for the nationalist right-wing would have. The result has a dual significance. It means that in European policy the door remains open for every possible course of action, including that of eventual membership of the European Union – which is what the government wants. It also means that the present mechanisms of direct democracy allowing voters to express their wishes will not have to be changed in any way. It should not be



Switzerland can continue exporting war materials. Voters rejected the arms export prohibition initiative with a big majority. (Photo: Keystone)

forgotten that there will have to be a referendum to ratify a treaty to join the EU in any case.

Left-wingers shared the failure of the right-wingers in this set of referendums. It is true that the crushing defeat of the left-wing initiative to prohibit the export of war materials – which received less than one vote in four – will not make all that difference. For in any case new legislation – in tune with the needs of the times and more severe than the old – will soon come into force with substantial popular support. In spite of this, however, the Social Democrats – and theirs is Switzerland's biggest party – should think very carefully about what happened to them on June 8. They ignored warnings from the trades unions, and as a result they were soundly trounced by the electorate. A sweeping majority of voters took the view that those defending jobs were acting in their interests.

Pierre-André Tschanz

Press review

The day after the June 8 referendums, the Swiss press showed greatest interest in the huge majorities. Top place was given to the failure of the Social Democrat initiative "For a prohibition on exporting war materials".

Berner Tagwacht

"Today, Switzerland is struggling for respect abroad. The picture of humanitarian Switzerland has been shattered. In spite of that, it has not been possible to link our own past – arms deliveries to the Axis powers, for example – to current politics. We shall have to see whether with its new legislation for controlling war materials and dual-use goods Switzerland will be able to conduct a foreign policy which will still be standing in fifty years time."

Basler Zeitung

"The Social Democrat initiative was really based on isolationist considerations, for what it meant was 'Don't get mixed up in foreign trade'. Seen like that, the initiative was a relic of the Cold War. It went far beyond the idea of a Swiss Blue Helmet contingent (rejected in June 1994) and the Federal Council's 1990 report on security policy."

Neue Zürcher Zeitung

"The referendum result not only indicates support for the arms exports policy at present being followed; but it also brings evidence of trust in Switzerland as a business location. The necessary consequences should be drawn from this also."

NEUE LUZERNER ZEITUNG

"In view of the economic situation reigning at the moment, the few of those entitled to vote who actually did so were not prepared to bring about further uncertainty."

JOURNAL DE GENEVE

et Gazette de Lausanne

"In is true that worries about the economic situation may begin to explain the result, but they should not be seen as the only cause of the huge majority."

Federal referendums

September 28, 1997

- Urgent federal decree on financing the unemployment insurance scheme
- Popular initiative "Youth without drugs"

November 23, 1997

March 15, 1998

June 7, 1998

September 27, 1998

November 29, 1998

Subjects not yet decided

LE NOUVEAU QUOTIDIEN

"In working for a prohibition of arms exports, the Social Democrats wanted to make Switzerland into an ethical model. But this would be to distinguish it from other countries at the expense of the economy. Voters did not accept this naive and moralising attempt to be angels."

LA LIBERTÉ

"What a rout! Those against arms exports suffered a defeat which was both devastating and unexpected in its proportions... It is a slap in the face for its social democrat and pacifist initiators."

Giornale del Popolo

"The Swiss are not fanatics – not even on Europe. Accepting the initiative 'Negotiations on joining the EU: let the people decide' would have robbed us of the possibility of weighing up in full independence the arguments for and against in such an important matter. And it would also have weakened Switzerland's negotiating position with Brussels substantially. At a time marked by high unemployment and in the midst of a severe economic crisis, Switzerland cannot afford to be bound in this way. It is a matter of common sense and our responsibility towards future generations."

CORRIERE DEL TICINO

"It may be assumed that a majority of voters did not wish to throw the present decision-making mechanism into the dustbin and allow themselves to be led by emotion rather than precise knowledge of the facts – and this even before negotiations are taken up."

PAT

Referendum result

Popular initiative "Negotiations on joining the EU: let the people decide!"

YES 417,932 (26.1%)

NO 1,188,029 (73.9%)

All cantons

Popular initiative "For a prohibition exporting war materials"

YES 362,777 (22.7%)

NO 1,241,994 (77.3%)

All cantons

Federal decree on the abolition of the gunpowder prerogative

YES 1,267,420 (82.2%)

All cantons

NO 275,780 (17.8%)

Voter participation: 35%

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