

Federal referendums of September 28, 1997 : two subjects: drugs and jobs

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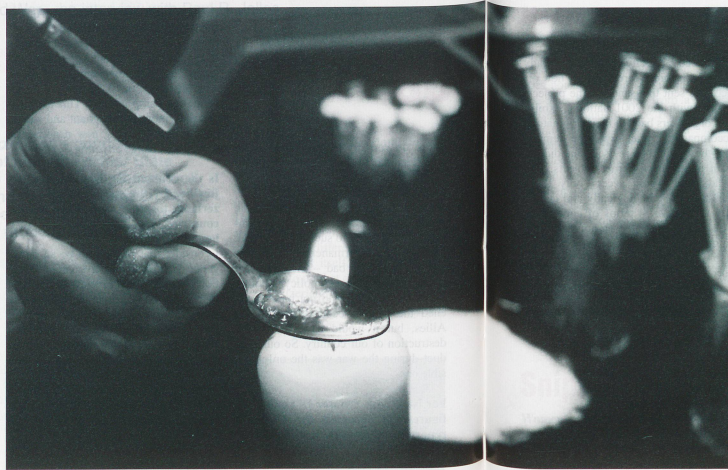
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Federal referendums of September 28, 1997

Two subjects: drugs and jobs

Pierre-André Tschanz

Drug policy and reduction of unemployment insurance benefits are the main issues in the federal referendums to be held on September 28. Voters will decide on the fate of the popular initiative entitled 'Youth without drugs' and the emergency federal decree to reduce dole benefits.



'Youth without drugs'

The popular initiative 'Youth without drugs' attracted nearly 141,000 signatures and was lodged with the federal chancellery four years ago. It was launched by right-wing and sports groups upset by the problems caused by the open drugs scene in the main towns of German-speaking Switzerland. They wish to introduce 'a policy of severity, aimed directly at abstinence'.

The authors of this popular initiative oppose present government drugs policy and wish to replace it with one centred on toughness, prevention, therapy and social reintegration. They are particularly opposed to the federal authorities' survival assistance measures, which they consider as aids to drug consumption and continued addiction. They would like the following instruments to be introduced to cope more successfully with the drug problem:

- an obligation to be laid on the federal government to apply severe measures aimed directly at promoting abstinence;
- introduction of new legal provisions against drug trading and consumption;
- active prevention measures to be taken by the federal government;

- encouragement and support to be provided by the federal government to ensure physical severance, lasting detoxification and the social reintegration of drug addicts;
- prohibition of drug distribution, with the exception of some substances to be used for strictly medical purposes.

Drug policy

At a later date the people and the cantons will have to pronounce on another popular initiative concerning drug policy. Entitled 'For a reasonable drug policy', this would require the legalisation of drugs and therefore has aims which are diametrically opposite to those of the 'Youth without drugs' initiative which is to be voted on in September. Present federal policy is somewhere midway between these two proposals. The strategy set up in 1991 aims to reduce drug problems in Switzerland and is divided into four parts: tough drug controls, prevention, therapy and damage limitation.

In addition to the traditional instruments of police checks and prevention,

present policy is also making use of recent progress in the fields of therapy and damage limitation. Since the beginning of 1994, for example, Switzerland has been engaged in scientific experiments involving medical prescription of heroin for those strongly addicted to it. These should enable the authorities to determine whether such treatment is capable of improving the health and living conditions of heroin addicts. They are at present being evaluated. Damage limitation includes measures aimed at reducing the risks of drug abuse and harm caused by it (by setting up contact and reception centres, distributing syringes, providing injection rooms, etc.).

The 'Youth without drugs' initiative is considered excessive and inappropriate by both houses of parliament and the Federal Council, all of whom recommend its rejection. It would bring to nothing the measures being taken since 1991 to limit the harm caused by drug abuse, as well as the types of therapy at present available.

Should taking hard drugs in supervised areas – off-the-street public premises in Basle are shown in the photo – remain permitted? The popular initiative 'Youth without drugs' says No. (Photo: Keystone)

Unemployment insurance

The reductions in unemployment insurance benefits on which voters will have to give their verdict on September 28 are part of a whole series of measures decided by the Federal Council at the end of last year to reduce federal expenditure. These include a freeze on 1997 spending, setting maximum spending increases for the next few years, substantial cuts in most budget items, and blocking credits so as to produce a uniform 2% reduction in most areas of the budget.

In two fields, including unemployment insurance, these measures require changes in the law. So that they could be put into effect in 1997 already, parliament approved them in the form of emergency federal decrees, and they came into force on January 1 of this year.

Daily allowances reduced

The emergency federal decree amending the unemployment insurance legislation will remain in force until 2002, unless of course it is rejected by voters in September – in which case it will be cancelled at the end of this year. It includes four measures. The non-repayable contributions to the unemployment insurance scheme by the federal government are abolished – thereby saving the exchequer Sfr. 200 million francs. The other three measures reduce benefits and are intended to compensate for this loss of income for the scheme.

The first is that the proportion of the former salary considered acceptable for a new job under the scheme is reduced from 70% to 68%. This means that an unemployed person who is offered a job providing an income equal to or higher than 68% of his last insured salary (in view of the insured income limit his actual salary may have been much higher) must either accept it or become liable to sanctions. The financial savings from this measure are not known, but it is estimated that Sfr. 10 million will be

saved by the reduction of allowances from 80% to 78.5% in cases where working hours are reduced.

However, the main reduction is in the daily allowances paid to unemployed persons. These are cut by 3% when they are above Sfr. 130 and by 1% when they are equal to or below that figure. The reduction in the allowance is 1% for those responsible for the upkeep of children, regardless of its amount. These reductions will result in economies of Sfr. 70 million.

Referendum

The last measure came as a particular shock to unemployed persons' associations in French-speaking Switzerland, and these have resorted to the referendum demand mechanism to challenge the emergency federal decree approved by both houses of parliament. They succeeded in collecting the 50,000 signatures needed to require a federal referendum in the three months allowed to them.

The trades unions and the left – which at first refused to support the referendum demand – have now decided to campaign actively to persuade Swiss voters to reject the emergency measures taken in the field of unemployment insurance.

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