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Promoting renewable energy sources is a central pillar of Swiss energy policy. More electricity is to be produced from solar panels. (Photo: Incolor)

IMPRESSUM

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I have a friend who uses an electric razor. Another wears a beard. I myself perform the daily procedure using water. However we men care for our faces, we use energy. For scissors, blades and lather containers all need energy to make.

Civilisation as we know it could not have developed without energy. Even before the industrial era, water power was used for energy, alongside the strength of men and animals. Water wheels on streams and rivers still remind us of the days when water power was used to drive corn-mills, saw-mills and smithies. Over the years the process continued step by dramatic step: expansion of water power, mechanical power, turbines, steam engines, electricity, atomic power. And increasingly it became true that the most ordinary everyday tasks, such as shaving, were impossible without the use of energy.

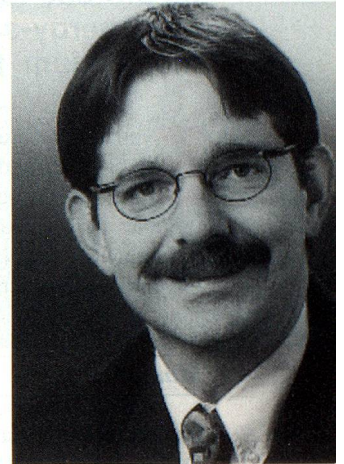
But the price of this convenience was also rising! The oil crisis of the 1970s and the atomic disaster at Chernobyl in 1986 provided dramatic evidence of this. The shock was profound. Weighty energy commissions developed energy scenarios, committees launched popular initiatives, opponents of nuclear power organised demonstrations, Green-peace activists blocked trains carrying nuclear waste, experts' reports were answered by counter-reports. A political gulf formed in Switzerland.

The result of the energy referendum of September 23, 1990, brought relative peace back to the scene. The out-come was a relatively narrow majority against banning nuclear energy and acceptance of a ten-year moratorium on the construction of nuclear power

stations, together with a broad agreement by voters to insert an energy article into the federal constitution. But this has not solved what is now the central problem of energy policy: how to make the supply of energy in sufficient quantity compatible with increasing scarcity of supply and environmental concerns. Most alternative renewable sources of energy, such as recycled district heating, solar energy and bio-energy, are still too costly. The same applies to energy-saving measures. And on these subjects the old political gulf has reappeared.

This means that energy reforms are still needed. The federal government has recognised the signs of the times by launching its 'Energy 2000' action programme. The subject is very complex. The inventiveness and imagination of past times – as also some of the problems – are giving way to new technological demands and a degree of interdependence which seek partners of equal rank. The most important prerequisite for the solution of today's problems is dialogue between all concerned! And just recently discussions about the new energy law have provided evidence that this is being sought and indeed found, at the top level at least.

Energy makes civilised life possible. We live in the hope that energy sources will never be exhausted. How very dull it would be if all the world's men had to wear long uncut beards!



Robert Nyffeler

Robert Nyffeler