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Tax on heavy transport, agriculture,

Three subjects are on the agenda of the federal referendums of next September 27th. They concern the performance-linked heavy transport tax, the popular initiative "for cheap food products and ecological farms" and the popular initiative "for the 10th AVS revision without a higher pensionable age".

Most attention will be concentrated on the federal law concerning the performance-linked heavy transport tax. This in fact constitutes a key element of the Government transport policy, and the product

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from this new tax on heavy transport will play a central role in financing the big railway infrastructure projects.

Performance-linked heavy transport tax

The law concerning the performance-linked heavy transport tax is contested by the Swiss Association of Road Transport Drivers (ASTAG), which in the three months laid down collected more than 190,000 signatures (at least 50,000 were needed) to provoke a popular vote on this law.

Swiss voters will therefore vote for a second time on the performance-linked heavy transport tax, the principle of which they approved in the federal referendums of February 20th 1994. This new tax will be the successor of the present lump-sum tax, introduced in the 1980s.

The replacement of the present lump-sum tax by a new performance-linked heavy transport tax aims in the first place to charge goods traffic by road with the costs which it occasions, both in terms of infrastructure costs (construction, operation and maintenance of roads) and in terms of what are known

as external costs (the costs not otherwise covered of damage to health, noise nuisance and accidents, damage to buildings). It should allow the gradual authorisation on Swiss territory of lorries of up to 40 tonnes, the present limit being 28 tonnes, and also a transfer from road to rail of goods traffic crossing the Alps in response to the wish expressed by the sovereign, also in the federal referendums of February 20th 1994, which inscribed in the federal constitution the provision on protection of the Alps.

The Federal parliament has laid down that this new tax on heavy transport should be situated within a range between 0.6 and 3 cts/T/km, which represents, for a frontier to frontier Basle-Chiasso journey a maximum sum of SFr. 360.-. The costs for the economy and transport are estimated to be within a range varying between SFr. 276 million and 1.7 billion, according to the figures decided on. It is the Federal Council which will decide on the amount of the tax within the authorised range. We should expect an amount of about 2.5 cts/T/km at the time when the tax comes into force in 2001.

The government will have to take into account, in reaching its decision, the results of the bilateral negotiations with the European Union. At the beginning of this year, Swiss transport minister Moritz Leuenberger and European transport Commissioner Neil Kinnock agreed on a price of about SFr. 325 to 330.- for a transit journey from Chiasso to Basle.

This performance-linked heavy transport tax should contribute to the financing of the new big railway infrastructures, in particular the new railway lines across the Alps. The method of financing of these big rail projects will be submitted to voters, during the federal referendums of next November 29th. This means that the decision on how the heavy transport tax will be used will be taken only later.

The Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications has calculated that the new tax will cost every Swiss household about SFr. 50 a year in higher prices.

Small farmers' initiative

This popular initiative stems from an association of small farmers in German-speaking Switzerland, whose logo is VKMB. It was lodged at the federal chancellery in June 1994 with 111,000 valid signatures. It is entitled the popular initiative "for cheap food products and ecological farms". It aims to protect farms managed solely by independent farmers using production methods particularly respectful of nature and the environment (biological farming and controlled husbandry of dairy herds in the open air for example). It fixes direct payment at SFr. 3,000 per hectare at least, with a ceiling of 17 hectares.

This popular initiative creates a number of problems of interpretation in the sense that it refers to an out-dated legal and political situation. In fact, on March 12th, 1995, voters and cantons changed the constitutional provisions relating to agriculture and agricultural policy in the framework of a large-scale reform of agricultural policy initiated at the beginning of the decade. Baptised "agricultural policy 2002" this complete reform pursues two main guidelines: an agriculture which is more com-

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petitive and more respectful of nature, environment, animals and the natural basis of existence and which provides multi-functional benefits in an economic manner.

The small farmers' popular initiative certainly contains one or the other element (direct payments, promotion of ecological agriculture) of the reform known as "agricultural policy 2002". But it emanates from a much more limited view of agricultural policy and in addition contains many imperfections. This to a point which makes the government and the majority in parliament consider that it represents an option diametrically opposed to "agricultural policy 2002". In some fields it represents a step backwards. It would for example block the development of the structures of Swiss agriculture with the protection which it would install for farms managed independently and not exceeding 17 hectares. Its application would compromise the competitiveness of Swiss agriculture and would result in the loss of many jobs both upstream and downstream of agriculture.

In brief, the authorities consider this initiative out-of-date and superfluous –

an opinion which extends into agricultural circles. The Union of Swiss Producers (the small farmers of French-speaking Switzerland) rejects it definitively, reckoning that it would create a chaotic situation. Bio-farmers oppose it for the same reason – that goes without saying – as the Swiss Union of Farmers. Most would have wished the withdrawal of this initiative in view of the application of "agricultural policy 2002", but the small farmers of German-speaking Switzerland would not hear of this. So it will be up to the people and the cantons to decide.

Pensionable age for women

The third subject of the federal referendums of September 27th, 1998, aims to correct the most controversial element in the 10th revision of the AVS: raising the pensionable age for women. Unable to do this otherwise without endangering the whole of this revision of the AVS, of which the other elements are considered positive, the Swiss Trades' Union Congress and the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions of Switzer-

Federal referendums

September 27, 1998

- Federal law concerning the heavy transport tax
- Popular initiative "for cheap food products and ecological farming".
- Popular initiative "for the 10th revision of the AHV without raising the pensionable age".

November 29, 1998

- Federal decree on the construction and financing of public transport infrastructure plans.
- Federal decree on a new grain article limited in time.
- Popular initiative "for a reasonable drugs policy".

land have collected nearly 106 thousand signatures to support the popular initiative "for the 10th revision of the AVS without raising the pensionable age". If the latter were to be accepted it would therefore correct the raising in two stages of the pensionable age for women: from 62 to 63 in 2001 and then to 64 in 2005. In addition it aims to permit a two-year anticipation of the payment of a pension for men, with a reduction in the pension. In so doing it would influence the next revision of the institution, which will concern the financing of the AVS and the age giving entitlement to a pension.

The Federal Council and the majority in parliament recommend the rejection of this initiative precisely because the question of the pensionable ages will have to be examined in principle in the framework of the 11th revision of the AVS and because it is inappropriate to create in advance a precedent which would restrain the freedom of decision of the government and the parliament. The left-wing returns the argument by observing that it was parliament itself which created the precedent by including a change in the pensionable age for women already in the 10th revision, when that element was not contained in the government's proposals. ■

The performance-linked heavy transport tax is intended to make rail transit more attractive and to discharge the transit roads. (Photo: Keystone)

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