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Autor: Tschanz, Pierre-André
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11,000 private individuals responded), are primarily of a formal nature, they nevertheless introduce several material improvements. However, in order to avoid endangering the entire reform by introducing elements considered too controversial in nature, the proposals were restricted to recommendations that had found broad consensus in Parliament. Other partial reforms are to be discussed in the near future, specifically concerning institutional bodies (judicial reform, reform of popular rights, government and financial equalisation).

Among the material improvements it is worth singling out the integration of handicapped persons (Art. 8), which obligates legislators to introduce measures against the discrimination of handicapped persons, the option of altering cantonal regions without a federal referendum (according to Art. 53, al., all that is needed is the approval of the Federal Assembly), the Federation's mandate to support multilingual cantons (Art. 70), and the federal commitment to the promotion of art and music (Art. 69).

The key formal improvements

On the linguistic side, the project team selected formulations that are in line with contemporary speech. Specialised terminology and foreign words were avoided as far as possible. To cater to the equality of sexes, a neutral or femi-

Modified articles on Swiss Abroad

Art. 40 Swiss nationals resident abroad

1 The Confederation promotes relations between Swiss Abroad among themselves and with Switzerland. It is entitled to support organisations which pursue this objective.

2 It enacts provisions governing the rights and obligations of Swiss Abroad, in particular with respect to the exercise of political rights within the Confederation, the performance of military or civil obligations, and the provision of support and social security insurance.

nine and masculine form was selected. For example (Art. 8.11, Equality): "All people are equal before the law." The structure and layout are clearer and every article is given a specific title. Moreover, the articles are often shorter than in the present version. The new basic law governs the entire area of constitutional law: it contains, for instance, provisions on data protection, which are regarded as constitutionally and legally relevant. On the other hand, several provisions in the present text were legally "downgraded", such as the ban on absinthe. ■

Federal Referendum of 7 February

Full endorsement

By rejecting the popular initiative of the Association of Home Owners and accepting the three other referendum proposals, the electorate has once more followed the recommendations of the Federal Council and the parliamentary majority on every issue.

The federal decree on amendment of the conditions for eligibility to the Federal Council (elimination of the cantonal quota system) was approved by 74.7% of voters (1,286,768 Yes versus 436'518 No) and 21 cantons. Only the Valais and Jura rejected the proposal, while the clearest approval came from Geneva (82.1%), Zurich (81.9%) and Basle-City (80.9%).

The constitutional provision on transplant medicine was accepted by overwhelming majority in all the cantons. The nation-wide vote in favour of the provision was 87.8% (1,501,954 versus 209,454). In the cantons of Geneva, Vaud, Fribourg and Ticino approval exceeded 90%.

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13 June 1999
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segment

The popular initiative "Home ownership for all" was rejected by 58.7% of voters (1,025,090 versus 721,729) and 20 cantons. Only Aargau, Glarus and Schwyz voted in favour of the initiative, while rejection was clearest in Basle-City (79.4%), Jura (65.5%) and Neuchatel (65%).

Finally, the revision of the Land Planning Law was approved by 55.9% of voters (952,450 versus 751,958). The highest approval came from French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland, while the proposal was rejected by both cantons of Appenzell as well as Schaffhausen, Glarus and Basle-Country.

Voter turnout was low at 37.5%.

PAT

Press Review

Two proposals were singled out in the Swiss press on the day following the referendums. The Swiss-German papers focused on the electorate's rejection of the popular initiative on "Home ownership for all", while papers in the French- and Italian-speaking regions of Switzerland devoted most space to the elimination of the cantonal quota for eligibility to the Federal Council.

Blick

"Is the dream of home ownership now shattered? No, was Federal Councillor Kaspar Villiger's unequivocal answer. The promotion of home ownership remains a government mission. And despite this victory, the Federal Council remains committed to a thorough examination of the much-discussed move to replace the rentable values system."

BERNER ZEITUNG BZ

"One can interpret the result in different ways, but there is no escaping one central fact. The electorate apparently sees no value in awarding itself tax benefits unnecessarily. Period."



The vote in favour of a revision of the Land Planning Law facilitates the redeployment of agricultural buildings. (Photo: Keystone)

Commentary

Not once since early 1998 has the Swiss electorate deviated from the recommendations of the Federal Council and the parliamentary majority. The first voting weekend of 1999 was no exception, seamlessly upholding the matchless track record of the past anniversary year.

The political significance of the four decrees of 7 February would not by itself merit any general conclusions on the Swiss electorate's confidence in its governing bodies. Far more significant were the votes in favour of the mileage-based heavy goods transport agreement and the financing of major railway

projects at the end of last year. Nevertheless, the results of the referendums of 7 February confirm the 1998 trend: the people are following the government's word.

This confirmation is a positive indication for the major referendums scheduled for next month on a reform of the Federal Constitution (18 April) and, most importantly, the anxiously anticipated referendum on the bilateral agreements with the European Union. Both referendums, particularly the vote on Europe, are of central importance. The Swiss people are hardly likely to go against their government's policies again, as they did in 1992.

Pierre-André Tschanz

LE TEMPS

"Something far from trivial has happened... in the inflexible world of Swiss federalism. For the first time the concept of "language region" has triumphed over "canton" in our constitution. Is the nation really aware of the significance of this event?"

Der Landbote

"...No more rentable values and mortgage deductions, political unanimity on maintenance deductions and targeted tax deductions for new home owners – the broad outlines of the correct path are known. Instead of

providing unnecessary tax benefits, this reform would create genuine incentives. Nevertheless, justice should also prevail in this instance. The constitution itself forbids discrimination against home owners."

Giornale del Popolo

"There may be a variety of reasons for this very clear vote, but most probably the Swiss people were primarily of the opinion that the new amendment also guarantees a balanced representation of the country's different linguistic regions."