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Focus on energy taxes

BY PIERRE-ANDRÉ TSCHANZ

Three of the five referendums up for vote concern energy policy. For the electorate a sign of things to come.

THREE OF THE FIVE PROPOSALS up for vote concern Switzerland's future energy and environmental policies. An initiative launched by environmental groups as well as two constitutional articles ratified by parliament are aimed at promoting renewable energies and increasing environmental awareness.

Ecological tax reform

The popular initiative "for a solar cent (Solar Initiative)" was submitted five years ago with 115,000 signatures. At the same time the popular initiatives "for rewarding energy-saving and against energy waste (Energy Environment Initiative)" were submitted. The latter, however, was withdrawn by environmental groups last Spring. On 24 September, therefore, people and states will be asked to vote on a constitutional article drawn up by parliament as a counter-draft

to the withdrawn Energy Environment Initiative on the one hand, and on the other hand on the solar initiative and its parliamentary counter-draft (see box on voting procedures).

The aim of the solar initiative is to promote the use of renewable energies (particularly solar energy). This is to be funded by CHF 800 million amassed from a tax on the consumption of non-renewable energies, which would be increased from an initial 0.1 cents per kilowatt hour (kWh) to 0.5 cents per kWh within five years. The constitutional article would then be lifted twenty years after the full tax rate comes into force.

As a counter-draft the Federal Assembly recommends a tax of 0.3 cents per kWh on the consumption of non-renewable energies (nuclear energy, gas, coal, oil). This would result in CHF 450 million for the promotion of renewable energies (solar, geothermic, wood, biomass), rational energy deployment and the maintenance and renovation of Swiss hydroelectric plants. For companies which rely heavily on the use of non-renewable energies, special regulations and exceptions were defined. The tax is to be levied starting in 2001 and until the introduction of an environmental tax of 2 cents per kWh (scheduled for 2007).

This environmental tax is recommended by parliament and the Council of States

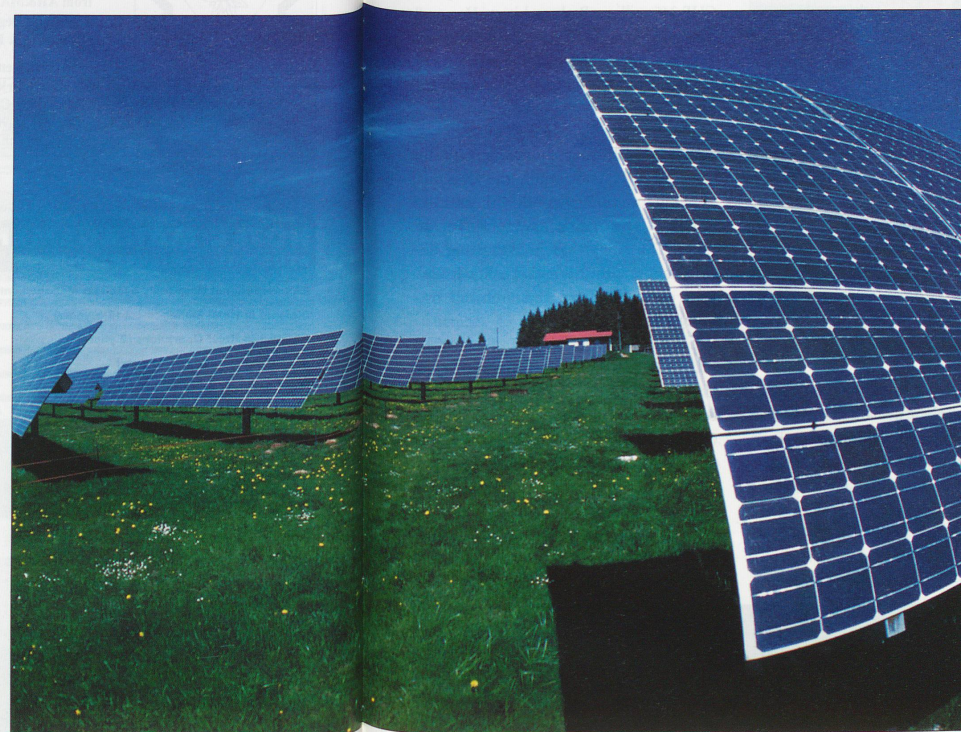


Photo: Markus Senn

as a counter-proposal to the Energy Environment Initiative which has now been withdrawn in its favour.

The tax on non-renewable energies would be introduced in 2004 at the earliest and progressively raised to a maximum 2 cents per kWh. The revenue from this tax (approximately CHF 3 billion for the maximum rate) would be used to reduce mandatory incidental wage costs (particularly AHV). The tax is designed as an incentive to promote the more efficient use of energy and ecological behaviour (by private households as well as businesses). Rather than flowing into the federal purse, it would be returned to industry and private individuals in the form of lower incidental wage costs (approximately -1.3 percent, divided equally between employer and employee).

Constructive referendum

The popular initiative "Increased citizens' rights through referendums with counter-proposals (Constructive Referendum)" was launched by the Social Democratic Party. Signed by 123,000 voters, the initiative proposes a new law for incorporation in the Federal Constitution, whereby it would be possible, with 50,000 signatures by eligible Swiss voters or at the instigation of eight cantons, to call for a referendum on a counter-proposal to a federal law or a generally binding federal resolution. This would supplement the current referendum law which permits voting on any federal law approved by parliament or any generally binding federal resolution. The option of bringing a counter-proposal to the ballot would bring about a certain refinement of

the law on referendum, allowing voters to demand an improvement on specific controversial measures without endangering the article as a whole.

Restriction of the foreigner count

For the umpteenth time in the last thirty years the electorate and states are called on to vote on policy towards foreigners. The popular initiative "for regulation of immigration" launched by the centre-right faction wants to commit the government to restrict the percentage of foreign nationals in Switzerland to 18 percent. At present the proportion is around 20 percent. The initiative defines neither measures nor a time frame for implementation of this objective. However, it demands that the number of foreigners be reduced as

quickly as possible through voluntary emigration as soon as the 18 percent threshold has been overstepped, and that simultaneously the issue of residence permits be suspended.

The initiative additionally calls for a reduction of Switzerland's attractiveness as a haven for asylum seekers, refugees of war, foreigners seeking protection, persons accepted provisionally, detainees as well as foreigners with no fixed abode in Switzerland.

The Federal Council and parliament view the content and objectives of this initiative as dubious and its implementation as problematic and, in view of the broad array of measures already in force to reduce Switzerland's attractiveness for asylum seekers, recommend that the initiative be rejected.

Solar energy is to be promoted as a central focus of Swiss energy policy.

Federal Referendums

24 September 2000

- Popular initiative "For a solar cent (Solar Initiative)" and counter-draft (constitutional article on an incentive tax for renewable energies).

- Constitutional article on a carbon tax for the environment (counter-draft to the withdrawn "Energy Environment Initiative").

- Popular initiative "For regulation of immigration".

- Popular initiative "Increased citizens' rights through referendums with counter-proposals (Constructive Referendum)".

26 November 2000

Subjects not yet decided.

New voting regulations

A regulation introduced in 1988 is to be used for the first time on 24 September. The regulation was drawn up to govern cases where the electorate is called on to vote simultaneously on a popular initiative and a parliamentary counter-proposal. In contrast to earlier referendums, voting for one option no longer excludes voting for the other.

Voters who prefer a reform (whether incorporated in the initiative or the counter-proposal) to the status quo will therefore be able to vote Yes twice on their ballot slip; two Noes or one Yes and one No are also permitted.

An additional item asks voters to mark their preference between initiative and counter-proposal (here only one option is permitted) in the event that both variants achieve a majority from the electorate as well as the states. The variant which achieves a majority vote from the electorate and states is enacted. PAT