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The controversial aspects of genetic engineering

BY PABLO CRIVELLI

A heavily-charged session has now drawn to a close: of the nine popular initiatives, only the proposal in favour of UN membership was recommended for acceptance. The National Council has still to issue its recommendation on this matter. Genetic engineering (genetics law): The people's representatives favour the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in agriculture, but under strict control procedures. Finally, a surprise: after six years of revision work, both chambers of parliament rejected the reform of the civil code on spouses' family names.

Keystone

Relaxed mood in the National Council chamber. Federal President Moritz Leuenberger talks to Brigitta Gadient (SVP/GR) and Mariangela Wallimann, General Secretary of the Federal Assembly.

AT THE FINAL VOTE, both houses of parliament unexpectedly rejected the reform of the civil code; the aim of the project was to promote equality between the sexes by permitting future spouses to retain their own surname without having to assume that of their spouse. This solution would have caused problems for children of such marriages: which surname would the child assume should the partners disagree? In such cases a judge would need to rule on the matter. Since many centre-right MPs from the ranks of the SVP, CVP, LPS and the FDP in Western Switzerland were dissatisfied with this solution, a reform which many regarded as a risk to the family unit was rejected at the last minute.

One step closer to the UN

The Federal Council made a rare recommendation to parliament: acceptance of a popular initiative for Switzerland's membership of the United Nations. An overwhelming majority of the State Council followed this recommendation, and the National Council should follow suit. Anxieties and doubts about Switzerland's neutrality were resolutely countered by Foreign Minister Joseph Deiss: acceptance of the initiative in no way impinges on neutrality – Switzerland would not take part in military actions. Four popular initiatives examined by the State Council were definitively rejected: the Greens' proposal "For a secure AHV – tax energy, not work!", and the proposal "For free choice of doctor and hospital" as well as the two trade union initiatives for a 36-hour week and a capital gains tax. Also rejected was the SVP's proposal for the use of the Swiss National Bank's surplus gold reserves. The State Council submitted a counter-proposal that the revenues from the sale of 1300 tonnes of surplus gold reserves should be distributed among the AHV social security fund, the cantons and the Swiss Solidarity Fund. The State Council massively opposed the anti-abortion initiative "For mother and child" which it regarded as too "fundamental". Finally, two popular initiatives proposed by the Group for a Switzerland without an Army which had been rejected by the State Council in March, were also opposed by the National Council: the proposal "For a credible security policy and a Switzerland without an army" and "For a voluntary civil peace service".

Genetics law: a controversial subject

The State Council approved a 10-year moratorium on animal experiments in the field of non-human genetic engineering. Due to the fact that research in this area is still in its infancy, the State Council elected to adopt a cautious approach. Consequently, the market is unlikely to see the launch of a genetically engineered animal in the next few years. The situation is different when it comes to the commercialisation of genetically modified plants. The majority of council members viewed the strict regulations in this area as sufficient. A minority argued in favour of a ban on commercial use until 2008. Various aspects of this technology remain open to question: what negative effects could the commercial use of genetically modified organisms have on humans, plants and animals? Opponents of GMOs fear that within such a limited geographic area as Switzerland it will be impossible to safely separate traditional from genetically engineered cultures. The proposal will now be submitted to the National Council for debate. The latter voted in favour of a more restrictive unemployment law and for extension of the limitation period for the sexual abuse of minors. Finally, a 3-year probation period for young drivers was proposed in a bid to increase road safety.