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Shadows over the autumn session

PABLO CRIVELLI

The 2001 autumn session will be remembered due to the shadow cast by two events which triggered a wave of shock and sadness throughout the country: the bloodbath of Zug and the Swissair debacle.

ALTHOUGH THE EVENTS had no major impact on the timetable for the parliamentary debates, they cast a pall of sadness over the Houses of Parliament. The National Council had an extremely busy programme to get through. In the foreign policy area, the fate of the popular initiative for Switzerland's membership of the UN is now in the hands of the electorate. Like the State Council in June, the National Council has also voted 147 against 39 to support the Federal Council's recommendation for membership. To allay any lingering doubts regarding the retention of armed neutrality even should the initiative be approved, the assembly decided to simultaneously integrate the constitutional article on neutrality in the legal text to be submitted to voters. The State Council, the first chamber to debate the issue back in June, approved this supplementary provision during the autumn session. In summer the State Council voted to reject the SVP's popular initiative to transfer the proceeds from the sale of 1300 tonnes of

surplus gold from the National Bank to the coffers of the AHV. The National Council followed suit during the autumn session, with the majority of members (123:43) voting in favour of a counterproposal to transfer the approximately CHF 18 billion proceeds from the sale of gold to an ad-hoc fund, the interest on which would be divided between the AHV, the cantons and the Swiss Solidarity Fund over the next thirty years. According to Minister of Finance Kaspar Villiger, the popular initiative would not only fail to secure the long-term financing of the AHV, but also undermine the Solidarity Fund. A referendum on the SVP initiative and the counterproposal will be held in 2002.

The National Council also addressed the issue of tax benefits. The Left expressed its disapproval of the family taxation reforms, which in the opinion of Social Democrats would favour medium and higher incomes rather than the families who genuinely need tax breaks.

Insurance reforms

The new Health Insurance Law launched in 1994 has not upheld one of the promises originally made by the government: namely, to put a brake on healthcare costs. In recent years health insurance premiums have been inexorably rising. In its debate on the reform of this law, the State Council proposed several corrections, viz. to retain the obligation of health insurance companies to recognise every medical service provider since, if lifted, patients would no longer have the freedom to select their doctor or pharmacist. The State Council also approved the law on equal rights

Keystone



The Swissair debacle has shaken Switzerland's self-confidence.

for handicapped persons: within the next twenty years all obstacles which make it impossible for handicapped persons to use public transport must be removed. In addition the State Council definitively approved a revision of the penal code concerning the sexual abuse of minors whereby, in future, charges may be brought by victims any time up to the age of 25. The State Council also launched the debate on a reform of civil rights which would entitle voters in future to request that revised legal or constitutional texts be presented in plain language, after which it would be the task of parliament to draw up the requisite constitutional or normative amendments.

Special session for Swissair

Both chambers of parliament held an emergency session to discuss the catastrophic financial situation of Swissair.

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm

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