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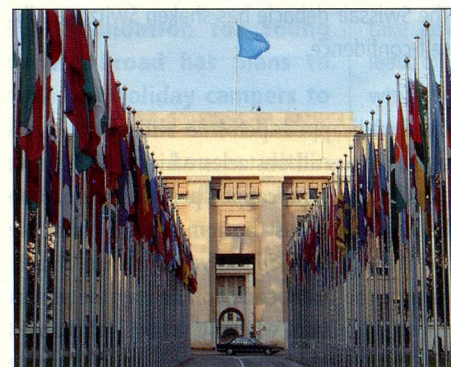
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UN membership this time round?

BY PIERRE-ANDRÉ TSCHANZ

Will March 3 2002 be a happier day than March 16 1986? For the second time the question of Switzerland's membership of the UN is being put to the vote.

Voters and cantons will also be asked to vote on a proposal to reduce the working week.



Imagepress

The UN in Switzerland: entrance to the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

WERE IT MERELY up to the government and parliament, Switzerland would have been a fully paid-up member of the United Nations long ago. More than fifteen years ago the propitious moment was thought to have finally come. But these high hopes were shattered when voters begged to differ: the proposal for UN membership was rejected by three out of four voters on 16 March 1986. Nation-wide there was a resounding No, even from Geneva!

As was the case fifteen years ago, the debate on Switzerland's accession to the UN will hinge on the issue of Switzerland's neutrality: can Switzerland become a member of the UN and still retain its neutrality? The Federal

Council is in no doubt. "Swiss neutrality will not be compromised by UN membership," it emphasised in its message to parliament. "Membership does not entail any obligation to send troops on military missions. The UN respects the neutrality of member states."

This position is largely echoed by most Swiss political circles with the exception of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and some small nationalist factions on the far right of the political spectrum, who claim that accession to the UN would endanger Switzerland's neutrality.

To allay any fears and in the hope of winning the double majority required for UN membership (a Yes from both the electorate and the cantons), the government and parliament have decided to reiterate in clear terms their commitment to Swiss neutrality, aware that this is an issue close to the heart of Swiss citizens. To this end they have published an application for membership addressed to the Secretary General of the UN and drafted in the event of a Yes vote on 3 March 2002. Moreover, in their Information Sheet they have decided to remind voters of the constitutional provisions governing neutrality, which needless to say will remain in force.

It is worth noting that Switzerland has been an observer at the UN since 1948 and, along with the Vatican, is the only state in the world which is not a UN member. Nevertheless it actively participates in numerous institutions within the UN system. It is estimated that UN membership will cost an additional USD 35 million on top of current contributions.


For a shorter working week

Launched by the Swiss trades union association, the popular initiative "For a shorter working week" recommends that annual working hours be gradually reduced to 1872, equivalent to a 36-hour working week with the proviso that no corresponding reduction be made in the wages of persons earning less than 1.5 times the average Swiss salary. It also

Extract from the application for UN membership

«Pursuant to the Federal Constitution, the Swiss Confederation is committed to protecting the liberty and rights of its citizens, ensuring the independence and security of the country, and promoting an equitable and peaceful world order. The Federal Assembly and Federal Council are charged with the task of implementing the requisite measures to preserve the neutrality of the country. Switzerland is a neutral state whose status is enshrined under international law. For the United Nations, the neutrality of a member state is compatible with the obligations defined in the UN Charter and contributes to the realisation of the aims of the United Nations. Accordingly, as a member of the United Nations Organisation, Switzerland will remain neutral.»

proposes limiting the maximum number of overtime hours to 100 per year.

The initiators believe that reducing the working week will lead to a more equitable division of labour. Parliament and the Federal Council, on the other hand, recommend that this popular initiative be rejected, claiming that to enshrine such rigid regimentation of working hours in the constitution would fail to address the needs of different sectors of the economy and different enterprises. 

Translated from the French by N. Chisholm

Federal Referendums

3 March 2002

- Popular initiative "For Switzerland's membership of the United Nations (UN)"
- Popular initiative "For a shorter working week"

Forthcoming referendum dates

2002

2 June / 22 Sep. / 24 Nov.

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