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No to asylum initiative, Yes to UIL social mechanism

Victory by a whisker for opponents of the Swiss People's Party's asylum initiative and a surprisingly clear vote in favour of the unemployment insurance law (UIL) reform – the Federal Council's recommendation was adopted by voters on a memorable referendum Sunday.

Never before has the outcome of a Swiss people's referendum been so narrow: Only 3422 votes decided the people's initiative "against the abuse of asylum rights". The main thrust of the asylum initiative had been that "if an asylum seeker has entered Switzerland from a safe third-party state, no application for asylum will be considered if the person has or could have applied for asylum in the third-party state." But 95 percent of all refugees enter Switzerland from a neighbouring country. According to Federal Councillor Ruth Metzler, affluent Switzerland would have been the first country in the world to virtually abolish the right to



For refugees such as these Sri Lankans, Switzerland remains a country which offers protection against persecution and civil war.

asylum from its constitution. It never came to this: 50.1 percent of voters rejected this radical tightening of asylum law, while a majority of 12.5 of the cantons voted in its favour. All French-speaking cantons gave the proposal a clear thumbs-down. The cantonal majorities in favour were in Eastern Switzerland, Central Switzerland excluding Lucerne and Zug, Zurich, Aargau, Solothurn and Basle Country.

The people's resounding Yes (56.1 percent) to the unemployment insurance law reform came as something of a surprise, given the flagging economy and rising unemployment. A reform of this social insurance was opposed by the trade unions, which criticised the reduction in the period for drawing benefits and the abolition of solidarity contributions by high-wage earners. Voters primarily wanted to ensure a solid financial basis for this social mechanism. Most of the Nos came from the western cantons of Geneva, Valais, Neuchâtel and Jura, where unemployment is very high.

Rolf Ribi

Translated from the German

COMMENTARY

Tradition upheld

A nation-wide cliff-hanger, right up until the last votes were counted in one of Zurich's inner-city constituencies! The canton of Zurich's vote in favour of the radical asylum initiative by the Swiss People's Party had already secured a cantonal majority. But the outcome of the people's vote was still undecided. Only the votes of this last Zurich constituency secured the people's majority: the initiative "against abuse of asylum rights" was rejected by a hair's-breadth people's majority despite the cantonal majority in its favour. Only on two previous occasions has a constitutional reform been rejected on this basis, and such a narrow outcome for a people's initiative is unique.

In the opinion of the Federal Council and a great many politicians, the initiative would have proved unworkable. There is no way that refugees can be immediately returned across the border to our neighbours, and comprehensive control of our borders by the army is practically impossible. Now, unresolved problems in the asylum area can be tackled by a reform to the asylum law – with due consideration to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, which grants unconditional right of asylum to persons whose lives are threatened due to a well-founded fear of persecution.

The SVP initiative would have signalled an end to the humanitarian tradition which dictates our treatment of refugees. Switzerland would have been the first country in the world to no longer grant refugees asylum. The most important outcome of this referendum is that the Swiss nation has been spared this particular poisoned chalice.

Rolf Ribi

Translated from the German

Federal Referendum

9 February 2003

- Federal decision of 4 October 2002 on reform of people's rights
- Federal law on the adjustment of cantonal contributions to hospital treatment

Forthcoming referendum dates 2003

18 May / 19 October / 30 November

Results of the Federal Referendums

Canton	"Against the abuse of asylum rights"		Revision of the law on unemployment insurance		Turnout in %
	YES%	No%	YES%	NO%	
ZH	50.6	49.4	58.5	41.5	52.7
BE	48.7	51.3	55.3	44.7	46.1
LU	48.3	51.7	60.8	39.2	52.5
UR	53.2	46.8	54.1	45.9	40.1
SZ	61.6	38.4	60.6	39.4	54.5
OW	51.1	48.9	62.4	37.6	44.6
NW	54.0	46.0	62.0	38.0	44.4
GL	63.0	37.0	61.9	38.1	46.2
ZG	48.9	51.1	61.7	38.3	53.4
FR	44.3	55.7	51.9	48.2	41.5
SO	55.6	44.4	55.3	44.7	49.7
BS	43.0	57.0	57.0	43.0	52.2
BL	50.4	49.6	55.9	44.1	49.4
SH	51.5	48.6	54.7	45.3	65.8
AR	56.2	43.8	60.8	39.2	56.0
AI	60.3	39.7	68.2	31.8	47.8
SG	60.9	39.1	61.2	38.8	49.0
GR	51.5	48.5	62.4	37.6	38.9
AG	58.8	42.0	59.4	40.6	42.6
TG	60.9	39.1	59.8	40.2	48.6
TI	48.2	51.8	52.6	47.4	33.0
VD	41.7	58.3	52.0	48.0	51.1
VS	42.3	57.7	48.3	51.7	36.5
NE	42.6	57.4	47.6	52.4	53.9
GE	38.6	61.4	45.6	54.4	50.9
JU	39.7	60.3	37.7	62.3	40.4
Total	49.9	50.1	56.1	43.9	47.2