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Autor: Crivelli, Pablo / Brodbeck, Gabriela
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Environmental policy at the crossroads

On 8 February voters will be asked to decide on the construction of a second tube for the Gotthard tunnel. The project is opposed by left-wing and environmental groups.

PABLO CRIVELLI


ONE OF THE CORNERSTONES of the people's initiative "Avanti – for safe, efficient motorways", which was submitted in 2000, is also contained in parliament's counter-proposal: the construction of a second tube for the Gotthard tunnel. This counter-proposal is to be put before voters on 8 February 2004. The "Avanti" initiative itself was submitted by automobile groups but later withdrawn, and covered three main demands: construction of a third lane on some sections of the A1 motorway, completion of the road network in urban agglomerations, and the construction of a second Gotthard tube. Against the Federal Council's advice, the counter-proposal put forward by parliament concedes the call for a second Gotthard tube but limits the expansion of motorway sections to the Amsteg–Airolo leg (whereas the car lobby's initiative called for expansion of the Berne–Zurich and Lausanne–Geneva sections as well). If the counter-proposal is accepted by voters and cantons, the Federal Council will have one year within which to submit an implementation programme for the associated road construction projects. These would be financed by a special fund, approximately half of which would be provided by revenue from petroleum tax (current revenue from this tax amounts to roughly CHF 3.5 billion a year).

Undermining transport policy?

One of the most controversial aspects of the counter-proposal is the construction of a second Gotthard tube. To pave the way for this, the alpine protection article approved by voters in 1984 and written into the federal con-

stitution would need to be axed. The article forbids the expansion of capacity on transit roads in alpine regions and obliges the confederation to shift heavy goods traffic from road to rail. Against this backdrop, voters also approved the "Alptransit" project currently under way to build an alpine rail transversal through the Gotthard and the Lötschberg. Environmental groups claim that a second Gotthard tube would endanger Switzerland's entire transport policy whose main aim is to promote a shift in heavy goods traffic from road to rail. They argue that if foreign haulage operators had access to a second Gotthard tube, there would be no incentive to transport their goods by rail. Besides increasing noise pollution and environmental strain, there is the problem of financing. Environmental groups believe that the cost of such a project would be disproportionately high and that, instead of pouring billions into road construction, the government would do better to invest them in education, the rail network and agriculture.

Increasing safety

The authors of the counter-proposal take a diametrically opposite view. In their eyes the construction of a second Gotthard road tunnel is justifiable on the grounds of safety, comfort and environmental protection, but most of all because it provides a concrete link between the country's linguistic regions. Four motorway lanes instead of two would also help to prevent the type of tragedy that occurred two years ago, when eleven people lost their lives as a result of a truck collision in the tunnel. The Gotthard tunnel remained closed for months after the accident, with huge negative consequences for the economy and the road traffic situation. The authors of the counter-proposal believe that, rather than increasing traffic volumes, construction of a second tube would improve the flow of traffic. Moreover, they claim that investments in road construction projects and infrastructure projects would boost economic growth. 

Translated from German.

Incurable criminals?

In addition to the "Avanti" initiative, Swiss voters will be asked on 8 February 2004 to approve or reject the people's initiative entitled "Life imprisonment for extremely dangerous sexual and violent offenders who are deemed to be incurable". The Federal Council and parliament recommend that the initiative be rejected since ongoing revisions to penal law will introduce a series of amendments which will better protect society against dangerous offenders. **PC**

Premium reduction initiative launched

The federal people's initiative "for lower basic health insurance premiums" was launched by the Swiss People's Party (SVP). It calls for an amendment to Article 117 of the federal constitution in order to incorporate principles for a stable, efficient, cost-effective healthcare system.

The aim of the premium reduction initiative is to create a solid, efficient basic insurance based on lower premiums as well as a transparent healthcare system with simple structures and less bureaucracy: a new "healthcare mechanism" with which Swiss citizens will be able to identify.

The initiative also calls for consistent implementation of the incentives which already exist in the healthcare system and the creation of new incentives for more cost-conscious practices.

BDK

Translated from German.

Federal Referendum

8 February 2004

Date of next referenda, 2004

16 May / 26 September / 28 November