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Autor: Lenzin, René
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Cuts at swissinfo/SRI

The spending cuts programme also affects swissinfo/Swiss Radio International (SRI). With effect from 2005, the government subsidy to swissinfo/SRI's foreign service will be drastically cut, and as of 2006 will be fully withdrawn. Up to now, the government has contributed some CHF 20 million to swissinfo's annual CHF 42 million budget. Now, swissinfo is to be fully funded from licence fees collected by the Swiss Radio and Television Corporation. According to swissinfo, the subsidy cuts will lead to a shedding of 35 of the 147 full-time jobs. Details of the job cuts will be announced in the near future, and will mainly affect the German, French, Italian and English services. The Council for the Swiss Abroad has voiced its objection to the government cuts (see also "Swiss Review" 06/2003).

RL

duced to CHF 2 billion and that a new federal inheritance tax be introduced to shore up federal finances. However, both proposals were soundly defeated. Nevertheless, various aspects of the programme were hotly debated: for example, the level of expenditure on education, research and technology, which was originally set at 6.5 percent. After much heated discussion, both houses of parliament finally agreed on 4.75 percent. Another controversial topic was the Federal Council's proposal to postpone certain in-

vestments in public transport. Ultimately, however, parliament followed the government's lead. By contrast, the proposal for a one-off discontinuation of the combination index for adjusting old age, survivors' and invalidity pensions was rejected. This would have resulted in pensions for 2006 being adjusted only to inflation rather than also in line with the wage index.

This spending cut would have resulted in savings of CHF 75 million: a small amount compared to the overall scope of the pro-

gramme. But from the outset left-wing parties and the unions had threatened to hold a referendum against this "social cut". By shelving this measure, the government has averted the referendum threat. Since no other group had collected signatures against the programme by the time this issue went to press, it will most likely be implemented as planned.

Second programme announced

The Federal Council and parliament debated long and hard on the merits and drawbacks of the budget and the associated tough spending cuts. However, the Federal Council remains convinced that further measures will be required in order to achieve a sustainable turnaround in the federal finances. In the course of this year, therefore, it intends to propose another programme to achieve further savings of CHF 2.5 billion. Details have still to be finalised.

René Lenzin 

Translated from German

Triple blow for the government

A resounding snub for Berne: voters rejected both the counter-proposal to the Avanti initiative and the rental law reform. They also went against the Federal Council and parliament by voting in favour of life imprisonment for violent offenders.

Voters and cantons made their opinion very clear on 8 February, with 63 percent of voters and all the cantons rejecting the counter-proposal to the Avanti initiative, 56 percent of voters and 24 cantons in favour of the life imprisonment initiative, and 64 percent of voters as well as all the cantons rejecting the rental law reform. The outcome showed virtually no differences between the language regions or between town and country. The turnout was just on 45 percent.

In all three of the proposals, voters decided against the recommendations of the Federal Council and parliament. Yet Federal President Joseph Deiss, commenting on the results at the end of the referendum day, claimed that because of the myriad amendments made by parliament to the Avanti

counter-proposal and rental law reform, the Federal Council did not feel it lost the referendum. The federal councillors responsible for both issues stated their intentions of formulating, as soon as possible, new projects that more accurately addressed the people's wishes.

In terms of transport policy, virtually none denies that the motorway network should be completed and expanded at critical junctions as planned, and that targeted investments are needed in the suburban transport area. On the other hand, it looks like the idea of a second Gotthard tunnel has been shelved for the foreseeable future. The project must now be revised to reflect these developments. As far as rental law is concerned, tenants and landlords fundamental-

COMMENTARY

Mistrust and a process of re-orientation

There is a certain rationale behind the results of the 8 February referendum. The counter-proposal to the Avanti initiative was overloaded, simultaneously promising everything and nothing, and, by undermining alpine conservation, cast doubt on the policy of shifting transport from road to rail which had already been accepted in the course of several referenda. The rental law reform gave landlords too much leeway for raising rents and the full inflation rate adjustment went well beyond the Federal Council's original proposal, conjuring up fears of a universal increase in rents. Finally, it proved impossible to counter the life imprisonment initiative with formal-sounding arguments against what is, in itself, a justifiable concern which had prompted victims' families to launch the initiative.

Despite this, the surprisingly clear vote by the electorate and cantons lead one to suspect that there was more to it than just the three issues. Three times voters and cantons gave their unequivocal opinion, and three times the Federal Council and parliament were left out in the cold. So, at the very least, the outcome must be interpreted as a vote of

mistrust in the government and parliament.

But the result must also be viewed against the backdrop of a changed political landscape. In the general election on 19 October and the Federal Council elections on 10 December, voters and parliament reconfigured Switzerland's political coordinates. Now all the political actors are busy finding their position within the new system. That goes for the new Federal Council, the political parties, and for voters themselves.

On 19 October, voters strengthened both ends of the political spectrum at the expense of the centre, polarising the political landscape. As a rule, however, votes on specific issues tend to avoid extreme solutions and favour only balanced compromises. This could explain the No to the Avanti counter-proposal and the rental law reform. The people's verdict could then be seen as a reminder to the centre-right parliamentary majority not to go too far.

On 16 May, two more proposals that threaten to polarise voters – the tax package and the 11th revision of the AHV – are up for vote, and the Left-Green camp in particular shows no willingness to compromise. The outcome will show whether voters really want to force centre-right parties back to the good old Swiss tradition of compromise.

René Lenzin

Federal referendum

16 May 2004

Dates of next referenda

26 September / 28 November

"Sovereignty of the people, not official propaganda"

The federal people's initiative entitled "Sovereignty of the people, not official propaganda" has been submitted by the "Citizens for Citizens" association. The initiative calls for an amendment to Article 34 of the Federal Constitution in order to guarantee freedom of opinion among the electorate and fair conditions for referenda. It also calls on the Federal Council to refrain from practising an information policy that presses its opinion on voters. The people's initiative aims to set constraints on the government's official propaganda in order to save millions in taxes.

BDK

Corrigenda

In the article entitled "Blocher and Merz join Government" in Issue No. 6/03 of the "Swiss Review", the following sentence "He has set his sights on Switzerland joining the European Union and NATO" should read "He has set his sights on preventing Switzerland joining the European Union and NATO". We apologise for this error.

ly agree that rents should not be linked to mortgage rates. On this basis the Federal Council will need to present a revised proposal.

Now that the life imprisonment initiative has been accepted, the next step is to implement it. However, the problem is to do this in a way that satisfies the referendum initiators without contravening the European human rights convention. The initiative calls for extremely violent criminals and sex offenders who are considered untreatable to be imprisoned for life, regardless of their development in jail. Their case will only be re-examined if fresh scientific evidence provides hope of a cure and the prisoner no longer poses a danger to society.

René Lenzin 

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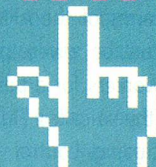
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A & S GmbH, Rudolf-Diesel-Str. 14

D-53859 Niederkassel, Tel:++49 (0)228 45953-0 Fax:-33



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