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Fresh wind for federalism

Voters and cantons gave clear backing on 28 November to the reform of the federal system, renewal of the federal authorities' mandate to levy taxes, and new legislation on stem cell research. Federalism won the day.

BY ROLF RIBI

THE REFORM of the federal system is a task of massive proportions. No less than 27 articles of the federal constitution have been amended to realign tasks between the Confederation and cantons and achieve a more equal balance of finances between rich and poor cantons. The main aim of this proposal was to revive and reinforce Switzerland's federal system (see "Swiss Review" No. 5/2004). The comprehensive proposal was backed by 64.4 percent of voters and 23 cantons. Of the six cantons who will have to pay out more than they receive under the new system, Basle Country, Zurich and Geneva voted in favour of the proposal. Three affluent cantons - Zug (83.7 percent), Schwyz and Nidwalden, voted No.


Federalism is "our country's secret weapon", said Federal Councillor Hans-Rudolf Merz. The new division of tasks allows the Confederation to concentrate on its core obligations (such as social security, national roads and national defence). The system will reinforce the sole responsibility of the cantons in certain areas (e.g. providing assistance to the disabled and related organisations) and promote intercantonal cooperation (e.g. for leading-edge medicine and universities).

Opposition to the federal system reform came from the canton of Zug as well as disabled groups. Zug, the canton in central Switzerland with the greatest financial assets and the lowest taxes, has no desire to become the "nation's milch cow". Under the new system, Zug will be obliged to pay CHF 121 million a year towards financial equalisation and probably raise its taxes accordingly. Worried that the cantons will curtail

their new social benefits, disabled persons and their advocates are calling for a federal framework law with clear provisions and standards governing aid for the disabled.

An even clearer thumbs-up was given to the proposal to renew the federal authorities' mandate to levy taxes. 73.8 percent of voters and all cantons apart from Zug (where 51.4 percent voted No) supported this less controversial measure. Now the government will be able to continue levying its two most important taxes, i.e. direct federal tax and VAT, until 2020. Together, these sources of revenue account for 60 percent of the federal income. Now the maximum rates for company tax (8.5 percent) and VAT (7.6 percent and 2.4 percent for daily consumables) are to be enshrined in the constitution.

Now that voters have approved new legislation on stem cell research, Switzerland can also permit research on human embryonic stem cells. 66.4 percent of voters and all cantons approved a law which Green and religious groups had challenged to a nationwide vote. The canton of Geneva, where research is an important part of the economy, recorded the highest level of support at 84.6 percent. The margin of Yes votes was less in rural-Catholic cantons such as Valais, Appenzell Innerrhoden, Obwalden and St.Gallen. Support for the new legislation was prompted by hopes of new treatments for serious illnesses such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes, paraplegia or heart failure for which no effective cure yet exists. Ethical objections to intervention in embryonic human life and the killing of embryos failed to sway opinions. Support for "controls, not bans" in basic research and concerns about securing Switzerland's status as a research community dictated the outcome of the vote.

The relatively low turnout of only 35.7 percent favoured the clear results. According to political observer Claude Longchamp, it was a relatively loyal pro-government electorate that turned out to vote. 

Translated from German

Dates of forthcoming referenda

5 June / 25 September / 27 November 2005

COMMENTARY

"Happy Sunday"

For the Federal Council and parliament it was a happy Sunday. In contrast to referenda held earlier this year, voters and cantons not only supported the federal proposals, but did so by an overwhelming majority. The reform of the federal system and the new division of tasks between the Confederation and cantons constitute an enormous task. The electorate's backing is proof that Switzerland is still capable of far-reaching reforms.

The clear support for the new federal system is a welcome political development, representing as it does a new opportunity for federalism and the Confederation. The many Yes votes in beneficiary cantons such as Uri, Basle City, Berne, Lucerne and the Jura are understandable. But the gratifying show of solidarity from the three more affluent cantons of Geneva, Zurich and Basle Country is a positive political sign for the nation. It is now up to the cantonal governments to foster cooperation within entire regions and take steps to safeguard against a new "cantonal mentality". The cantons must also prove that they do not intend to leave the disabled in the lurch, and to demonstrate their willingness to spend the new funds available to them on care and training for the disabled.

The clear two thirds majority in favour of the new legislation on stem cell research was unexpected, given the highly ethical issues involved in research on human embryonic stem cells. According to the Federal Court, embryos also possess human dignity. But the vast majority of voters believed that the therapeutic possibilities of such research and the status of Switzerland as a centre of research were more important than the protection and dignity of a days-old embryo. Nevertheless, the move does not give research scientists carte blanche and they will still need to observe the clear guidelines laid down by the new law. It is now up to the Swiss Ethics Committee to monitor new research on human stem cells. Even now, politicals are talking of the possibility - as yet prohibited - of therapeutic cloning, i.e. the mining of genetically identical cells for humans.

Rolf Ribi