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On course for the poorhouse?

Is Switzerland slowly but surely becoming the poor man of Europe? This prediction isn't the result of any liaison between extreme experts and sensationalist journalists; it actually stems from someone who should know what he's talking about – Jean-Daniel Gerber, Switzerland's Secretary of State for Economic Affairs. In an interview he pointed out that unless Switzerland implements radical economic reforms as a matter of urgency, it will fall increasingly behind the other countries of Europe and, within a quarter of a century, will end up right at the bottom of the pecking order.

This gloomy prediction by Jean-Daniel Gerber caused a bit of a stir at the start of February and prompted a flurry of reporting in the press. Criticism was levelled at the high cost of living in Switzerland and, once again, at the country's failed attempt to join the EEA in 1992; politicians have called for intervention by the State. So, how dire a situation is Switzerland actually in as an economic centre?

Switzerland is still a long way off the poorhouse. Unemployment is still low compared to other countries, and, by international standards, its competitiveness is still outstanding. If there is one thing that we should bemoan, it is that, economically, Switzerland is suffering at a very high level, as Rolf Ribi's study on the strengths and weaknesses of the Swiss economy shows (pp. 4 – 7). Switzerland remains one of the ten most competitive countries in the world and has even moved up two places on last year. However, policymakers are facing an increasingly tough challenge to ensure that it continues to be an attractive economic centre in the future. As we're all only too aware, the competition isn't sleeping, especially in Asia.

There is something which strikes me as much more alarming than the state of the country's economy, however: an increasing number of Swiss citizens cannot read or comprehend the meaning of texts. An international study involving the Federal Office of Statistics, among others, has revealed a disturbing finding: despite having completed their education, over a fifth of the Swiss population is unable to master everyday tasks which require minimal reading skills. The consequences of this are fatal. People who can't understand the patient information leaflets enclosed with medication, recipes, newspapers or official correspondence and who, therefore, can't use the Internet either, are



Heinz Eckert

Modern illiteracy is alarming and demands urgent measures.

marginalised from political and social life and have virtually no opportunity to find work. What's more, women fare much worse in the study than men.

Education experts and representatives from the business community describe the increase in this modern form of illiteracy as alarming and are promoting measures in adult education as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, they warn, the gap between those people with employment skills and those who are excluded from paid work due to their educational shortcomings threatens to become "perilously wide".

And for the record, here are some figures for the Swiss economy: Swiss firms made an astronomical profit of CHF 54 billion between them in 2004, three times more than in 2002. While profits have been rising, jobs have been falling, with no fewer than 200,000 jobs disappearing in Switzerland in recent years.

Heinz Eckert

Translated from German.



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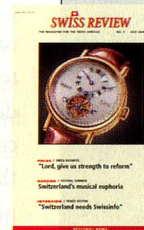
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Despite its problems, Switzerland is still one of the world's ten most competitive nations. The cover photo shows a masterpiece from the watch industry, the first "Tourbillon" with a manual wind from Breguet, a member of the Swatch Group.

COVER: Factory photo

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