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Climate change becomes an election issue

LATE LAST YEAR, former US vice-president Al Gore had everyone talking about his alarming environmental documentary. In January and February, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published its first two reports. These are considered to be the most comprehensive assessments of climate change to date, bringing together the work of hundreds of scientists from around the globe. The reports show that scientists now have empirical proof that human activities around the world cause global warming.

The first IPCC report addresses the physical causes of climate change, i.e. the increase in greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide. The second describes the possible effects of global warming on humans, plants and animals in various regions of the world. The forecasts make for worrying reading. For instance, a rise in temperature of just 4 per cent could wipe out 40 per cent of the our planet's species of flora and fauna and permanently inundate huge areas of land around river deltas in Africa and Asia. In addition, global warming could cause water shortages for up to 250 million people in Africa. The two reports can be consulted at www.ipcc.ch.

An earlier report by former World Bank chief economist Nicholas Stern (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk) caused a similar stir last October. The Stern Review is the most extensive economic survey yet of climate change, and its core message was a bombshell for the economy: unless 1 per cent of global GDP is spent tackling climate change between now and 2050, vast parts of Asia will become uninhabitable and hundreds of millions of people will be forced to flee their homes. The resultant cost would be higher than that of the two world wars combined.



Heinz Eckert

As in the 1987 general elections, environmental issues and particularly climate change will undoubtedly feature highly in campaigning this autumn, and political analysts believe that the Greens will be the main beneficiaries. But the social and political omens are very different to those of 20 years ago. Whereas in the late 1980s the "green" debate was dominated by apocalyptic warnings, today's environmental issues are discussed in a more sober, less ideological manner. Now that even the economy has opened itself up to ecological ideas, centre-right politicians have become far less defensive in their stance. Indeed, ever since Al Gore began preaching environmental protection around the world, the issue has become nothing short of sexy. Defensiveness has given way to the realisation that global warming has to be tackled – even in the United States.

It remains to be seen to what extent the Greens will profit from this sea change. All the pollsters assume that their strong showing at various cantonal elections will be echoed nationally, and that the Greens will gain votes at the federal level.

Swiss citizens abroad who would like to vote in a general election for the first time should contact their local Swiss embassy or consulate now to get on to the electoral register. We sincerely hope that many more Swiss abroad will take an active interest in the Swiss elections and swell the current figure of 110,000 voters registered abroad.

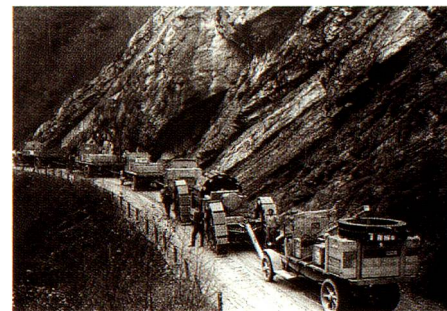
The next edition of the Swiss Review will be devoted entirely to the elections, in line with the motto "Everything you ever wanted to know about voting (but were afraid to ask)".

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Global warming threatens even the Aletsch glacier
Photo: Swissimage

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