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A bonanza for everyone?

Money from the state for everyone unconditionally – that is the aim of the popular initiative for an unconditional basic income which will be put to the vote on 5 June.

JÜRG MÜLLER

Everyone, regardless of whether they are in gainful employment or not and irrespective of their financial position, would receive a basic income. Those behind the initiative indicate an amount of CHF 2,500 a month for each adult. Children and young people up to the age of 18 would receive CHF 625.

The initiative does not explain exactly how this is to be financed. However, reflections on this matter are set out in supplementary documentation: Someone earning CHF 6,000 a month would only receive CHF 3,500 directly from their employer. CHF 2,500 from every salary would go into the basic income pot from which the employee would receive the remaining CHF 2,500. The basic income would also replace certain welfare benefits. However, the financing of the remainder is even contested by the advocates of the unconditional basic income.

The debate is heavily influenced by people's different concepts of what it is to be human – do people essentially enjoy working? The authors of the initiative – primarily artists, journalists and intellectuals – are inclined to believe they do. In their view, few people would be content with an income of just CHF 2,500, which means the financial incentive of gainful employment would be maintained. The Federal Council rejects the proposal because it would have a "far-reaching, undesirable impact, in particular on the economic system and social cohesion". A clear majority of MPs share this view. In the Na-

tional Council, CVP spokesperson Ruth Humbel dubbed the initiative a "romantic social experiment". The SP and Greens do not support the initiative either, apart from a few exceptions.

A global issue

Such opposition comes as little surprise. Unconditional basic income removes the model of paid work as the cornerstone of the economy and society. Many on the left also regard the initiative as a fundamental attack on the welfare state. This is because a uniform monthly pension of CHF 2,500 could never replace the tailored social insurance benefits that take account of the vicissitudes of life. There is also a fear that Parliament could initiate sweeping welfare cuts when it came to structuring the basic income in specific terms – the lowest possible basic income and the abolition of other welfare benefits. But that is precisely what makes unconditional basic income appealing to some neo-liberals. They see it as a means of cutting back the social insurance system.

This issue is not just being discussed in Switzerland. A restricted experiment with an unconditional basic income is to be conducted in Finland in 2017. Similar ideas are also being toyed with in France and the Netherlands.

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Public service, petrol as a milch cow and test tube babies

Three very different proposals will also be put to the vote on 5 June.

There was rare unanimity in Parliament over the "pro public service" popular initiative launched by consumer magazines – the bill did not receive one single vote. The initiative calls for semi-public enterprises, such as the Swiss Post Office, Swisscom and the SBB, not to seek to achieve a profit, to refrain from cross-subsidisation in other administrative areas and not to pursue any fiscal interests. The salaries paid by these companies should also not exceed those of the federal administration. The initiative requires a "decent service at reasonable prices" instead of "overpriced tickets", "maximum fares" and "profits running into billions". Opponents warn that the popular initiative could lead to a weakening of public services and tax increases.

The "milch cow initiative" does not concern agriculture but instead transport. Car importers and road associations, which are behind the initiative "for a fair transport policy", believe they are the milch cows of the nation. This is because only half of all revenue from petroleum tax goes towards road transport. The other half goes into the general federal coffers. The authors of the initiative are calling for all of the tax revenue to be ring-fenced for road transport. A funding shortfall is looming here, they say. Nobody in Parliament is supporting the popular initiative, apart from the SVP and some FDP MPs. The introduction of complete ring-fencing would jeopardise other federal undertakings. Opponents also warn of tax deficits of CHF 1.5 billion.

The revised **Reproductive Medicine Act** concerns ethically complex issues. The constitutional amendment was approved by the Swiss people in 2015, making previously prohibited pre-implantation diagnostics possible. However, a broad-based committee made up of figures from various parties from left to right has called a referendum against the implementing law. This concerns the conditions under which genetic screening can be undertaken with artificial insemination. There are also fears over selection by eliminating embryos with trisomy 21, for example, before implantation into the womb. (JM)