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September's referendum was marked by a “no risk” approach

No higher old-age pension and survivors' insurance (AHV) benefits, no “green economy” and greater powers for the intelligence service were the decisions reached by the Swiss people on 25 September.

JÜRGEN MÜLLER

Who does not gladly hold out their hand when offered the prospect of money? The referendum in September concerned a 10 % increase in the AHV pension. The Swiss nevertheless spurned the offer. Almost 60 % of voters rejected the “AHVplus” popular initiative put forward by the trade unions and left-wing parties. The authors

over the coming years, the existing financing problems would be further exacerbated if the initiative were adopted. The opposition contended that future generations should not be further encumbered.

During the referendum debate, besides the usual trench warfare between left and right, a row between experts erupted over which of the two

cit in future than the pension funds, mainly in view of the huge falls in returns on the capital markets. For example, Cédric Tille, an economics professor, financial market expert and member of the Bank Council of the Swiss National Bank, supported the initiative. He maintained that the importance of the second pillar should be limited and the first pillar, namely AHV, strengthened.

Stabilisation instead of top-ups

The initiative was thrown out despite AHV being extremely highly valued by the Swiss people. On the one hand, the argument that this insurance scheme should be stabilised in light of the forthcoming problems rather than financially topped up at a delicate moment clearly won the day. On the other, Parliament was in the middle of the debate about the “Pensions 2020” reform package put forward by the Federal Council at the time of the referendum. This provides a complete overview and covers not just AHV, but also the pension funds. Had the initiative been approved, the entire reform package would have been jeopardised. The electorate's rejection of the popular initiative therefore represented a vote of confidence in Parliament in the hope that the ongoing pension reform will result in a balanced solution capable of attracting majority support. However, the outcome of the parliamentary procedure was not yet known at the time when this issue went to print.

The “green economy” popular initiative, which advocated a “sustainable and resource-oriented economy”, also failed to win favour. The initiative launched by the Greens and supported by left-wing parties and a number of organisations and associations that focus on environmental issues fell much further short than the AHV initiative, with 63.6 % of voters



The trade unions and left-wing parties failed with their AHV initiative. The photo shows Vania Alleva, President of Unia, after the defeat in Berne.

Photo: Keystone

were seeking to give AHV greater weight in the overall system of retirement provision. The Federal Council, Parliament and the conservative parties rejected the proposal primarily based on demographic grounds. As the high number of people born in the 1950s and 1960s will reach pension age

key pillars of old-age pension should be strengthened – state AHV or occupational pensions, that is to say the pension funds. One side primarily emphasised the looming AHV shortfall owing to the demographic trend. Others argued that AHV was better placed to make up the financial defi-

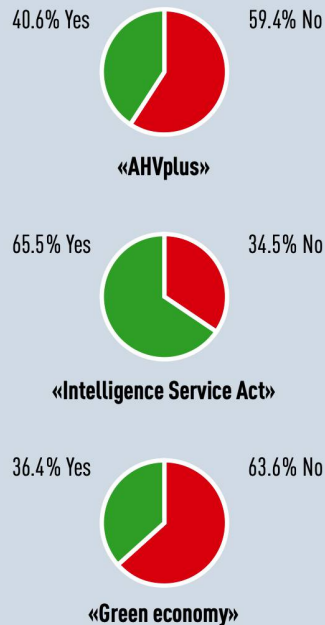
opposed. The popular initiative sought to make more efficient use of natural resources, such as water, soil, air and raw materials, thus better protecting them. As with the AHV initiative, this popular initiative was also based on arguments about concerns over future generations who will have to deal with the negative consequences of our economic activity. In particular, the economy should be made to use raw materials sparingly and to generate as little waste as possible. This should in turn be recycled and reused in the economic cycle as raw materials. The authors wished to reduce consumption by 2050 to the extent that it no longer exceeds the capacity of our single planet. If everyone in the world used as many natural resources as in Switzerland, three planets would be required over the long term.

Too much too soon

The initiative's fundamental concerns were also recognised by the Federal Council. It even wanted to put forward a counterproposal and to update the Environmental Protection Act. However, Parliament opposed the Federal Council's plan and only the initiative was put to the people. This went too far for the government, Parliament and, above all, large sections of the economy and sought to achieve too much in too little time. Far-reaching measures for the economy and a negative impact on competitiveness, growth and employment were presented as arguments. Opponents also maintained that lots of measures have already been introduced.

The consumption cuts highlighted by the opposition referendum campaign may have swayed many voters to reject the proposal. While the personal restrictions were often exaggerated, significant reductions

Referendum results of 25 September 2016



would probably have been required to achieve systematic implementation of the new constitutional provisions. However, the main reason for the “no” vote may have been the spirit of the times – environmental issues are currently not amongst the major concerns on the Swiss public’s “worry barometer”.

Trend towards security

In contrast, the new Intelligence Service Act is very much in line with current trends and was overwhelmingly approved by 65.5 % of voters. The very first sentence in the official “Federal Council’s explanatory statements” – commonly known as the “Bundesbüchlein” (government pamphlet) – captures the current mood: “The Federal Intelligence Service (FIS) aims to ensure Swiss national security. Its task is to detect threats at an early stage, such as those posed by terrorism.” The FIS shall in future also be permitted to infiltrate com-

puters, tap telephone calls and bug private rooms, according to the new Intelligence Service Act. This regulates the duties but also the limits and control of the FIS. It provides for new measures to obtain information – for example, through surveillance of the postal and telecommunications services – concerning terrorism, espionage and attacks on critical infrastructure. The FIS is subject to multi-level control by the bodies of Parliament, the administration and the Federal Council.

An “alliance against the snooping state” – consisting primarily of small, left-wing parties and youth parties – called the referendum against the Intelligence Service Act. Opponents pointed to the end of privacy: “Everyone is under surveillance, not just criminals as is often claimed. The tapping of telephone calls, reading of emails, Facebook, WhatsApp and SMS messages as well as the monitoring of the internet through keyword searches are means of mass surveillance irrespective of suspicion,” they contended. Experience has shown that comprehensive surveillance has “not prevented one single terrorist attack”, the authors of the government pamphlet claim.

Such arguments failed to convince the majority of voters, with fears that Switzerland could also be hit by terrorism one day proving too strong. In light of this situation, the view that the realigned intelligence service will at least make some contribution to greater security is understandable.