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Many new dads want more days off

Switzerland has been discussing the introduction of paternity leave for almost two decades. Parliament has always stood in the way, but the mood is now changing. Voters could make a landmark decision in September.

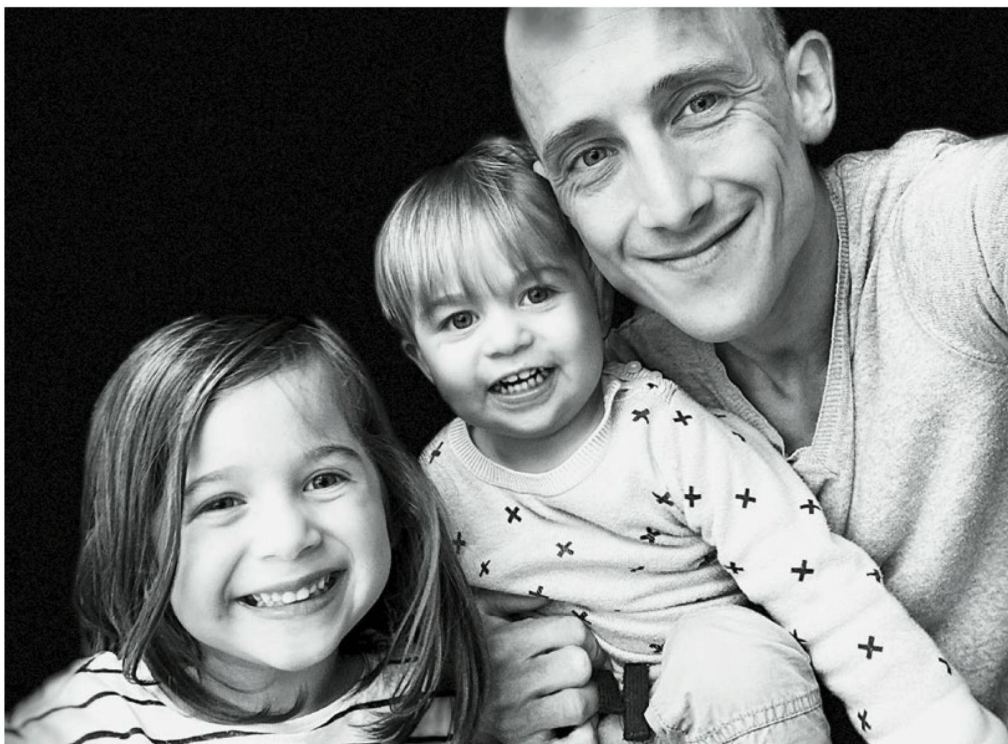
has learned from the 2014 debacle: back then, aviation specialists called the Gripen ‘half-baked’. The defence minister at the time, Ueli Maurer (SVP), came under fire as boardroom infighting spilled over into the public domain. It therefore came as no surprise when the electorate said no.

Amherd has widespread support

Another difference is that the current defence minister, Viola Amherd, is very popular in the opinion polls. The fact that she is well liked makes it easier for her to fight the Swiss Air Force’s corner beyond the usual conservative and centre-right spheres. And her messages seem to be working: a 2019 survey by ETH Zurich suggested that a majority of Swiss regard the armed forces as a necessity and believe that only just enough or even too little is being spent on defence.

Amherd’s military-sceptic opponents could have their work cut out this time, it appears. Referendum committee member Lewin Lempert disagrees, insisting that there is a very strong case for voting no. “The government is going into this venture blindly because it doesn’t know the aircraft model,” he says. The new fighter jets could also cost around 24 billion francs over their entire lifespan, he adds, claiming that figures from other countries back up this estimate. Furthermore, Lempert believes that it is hard to justify spending six billion francs on fighter jets during the current coronavirus crisis.

Whose arguments will hold sway? We will see in autumn.



Hauke Krenz and his two children. The stay-at-home dad epitomises the change in society.

Photo provided

MIREILLE GUGGENBÜHLER

Hauke Krenz received just one day of paid leave from his employer for the birth of his first child. That was five years ago. Afterwards, he would have had to return to work and leave his wife and newborn on their own. But Krenz was having none of it. “I would have felt bad otherwise,” says Krenz who lives in the Geneva suburb of Lancy. “I wanted to be a part of the family from the start. That means taking responsibility and building a close relationship with my child. One day of paid leave often isn’t even enough to be properly involved in the birth.”

Krenz, who is a qualified business economist, consequently used his annual holiday entitlement to be with his wife and child in the weeks fol-

lowing the birth. At the same time, he protested “in the strongest possible terms” to his employer about being unable to take any extended paternity leave. The same employer has since changed its family policy, having allowed Krenz to take ten days of paternity leave when his second child was born two years ago. Attitudes are evidently changing.

Young professionals want attractive leave schemes

Krenz is by no means alone. Many young families in Switzerland now advocate the view that fathers also have an important postnatal role to play. Consequently, a growing number of Swiss companies are offering paternity leave in order to remain at-

tractive to young professionals. Pharmaceutical firm Novartis leads the way, giving new dads 90 days of paid leave. Companies such as Migros, Coop and Swisscom grant 15 days.

However, there has never been any legislation on paternity leave as such in Switzerland. The law only stipulates 14 weeks of maternity leave. Fathers can still only take one day off to be at the birth of their child. It is at the discretion of the employer as to whether employees also get paternity leave on top.

But things could soon be changing, with all fathers in future being entitled to take ten days of paid leave in the first six months after the birth of their child – either all at once or by the day. This, at least, is the voting proposal due to be submitted to the People on 27 September 2020.

Over 30 unsuccessful motions

Paternity leave has been under discussion for years in Switzerland. Over 30 parliamentary motions calling for the introduction of paternity leave, or even parental leave shared between mother and father, have been submitted at federal level since 2003. Yet all of them have been unsuccessful. On each occasion the cost factor was the most important consideration. The federal government has calculated that the outlay needed to cover the latest paternity leave proposal would amount to 230 million francs per year.

A popular initiative that was submitted in 2017, advocating four weeks of paternity leave, is the reason why the Swiss electorate can now vote directly on a statutory ten-day period of



"Swiss dads now play more of a hands-on role than they have ever done," says trade unionist Adrian Wüthrich.

Photo: parlament.ch



"State-funded paternity leave does not necessarily turn you into a good dad," says businesswoman Diana Gutjahr.

Photo: parlament.ch

leave for new fathers for the first-ever time. The Paternity Leave Now! association withdrew the initiative a year ago to allow parliament to make a counterproposal of ten days instead. This is a compromise, but it still goes too far for some. A cross-party committee, formed in protest against "ever-increasing federal taxation", collected enough signatures to force this autumn's referendum.

Fathers should be there for the long haul, say critics

Opponents of the proposal are under no illusions that the role of the father is changing in Switzerland. "Many young women today are highly qualified and want to continue working after childbirth," says SVP National Councillor Diana Gutjahr, who runs a business herself and heads the referendum committee with other conservative and centre-right politicians. According to Gutjahr, the committee have no problem either with the fact that many fathers nowadays want to take on an active family role. Nevertheless, she adds: "Ten days of state-funded paternity leave does not necessarily turn you into a good dad. Being a father means being there for the long haul – or at least 18 years."

The referendum committee also criticise two specific elements of the proposal, namely that the two-week period of leave would be funded under the same income compensation scheme originally related to maternity pay, and that the government, in their view, would be meddling in Switzerland's liberal job market. "Our social security funds are already

in debt – we should not be adding to the strain," says Gutjahr. "The aim of social welfare is to relieve financial hardship and not satisfy every last whim," she says. Gutjahr also believes that companies would be deprived of the means of offering their own paternity leave to gain a competitive advantage.

The yes camp want fathers to be there from the start

But it is these individual arrangements that supporters of the proposal have a problem with. "Dads need to be able to play an active role in family life right from the start," says Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) politician and chairman of the Travail Suisse trade union umbrella organisation, Adrian Wüthrich. "This applies to all fathers and not just those who can afford to take unpaid leave or whose employers already offer extended paternity leave. Switzerland is the only country in Europe with no statutory paternity and parental leave. Yet Swiss dads now play more of a hands-on role than they have ever done."

Irrespective of the referendum, Hauke Krenz is convinced that it was the right decision for him to stay at home for an extended period when his children were born. "I think you forge a closer, more natural bond with the child that way," he says. This bond is now even stronger, given that Krenz has since put his job on hold to look after his children full-time. "I don't want to look back in ten years and regret having missed out on this time," he says.