

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1982)
Heft: 1786

Artikel: First steps towards financial recovery
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686127>

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First steps towards financial recovery

SWITZERLAND is still one of the world's richest countries. But despite this, one of the main topics discussed during the last 12 months has been the critical situation of the federal finances.

The public debt has been increasing rapidly over the past few years and interest payments provided for in the 1982 budget amount to nearly six per cent of the government's total planned expenditure.

In November the Swiss electorate approved a financial scheme which allows the government to continue levying a direct federal tax and a higher turnover tax. But this is only a first step towards possible financial recovery, and in its last session, Parliament approved a motion demanding that the government make further serious saving efforts.

How to cover future energy needs has also been a major concern of the Swiss public, in particular the problem of nuclear energy. The controversy over the planned nuclear power station at Kaiseraugst continued, although in October, the government finally agreed in principle to allow the project.

The government did not have much of a choice after its earlier ruling that an additional nuclear power plant would be necessary by the 1990s to meet additional energy needs.

Parliament has now the right to veto the government's decision. Opposition against the nuclear plant, which would be situated in the densely populated area of Basle, continues, and it is possible that the Swiss people will eventually be called to the polls to decide on the Kaiseraugst project.

An initiative, which was submitted to the federal authorities recently, demands a ban on the

construction of any further nuclear power stations.

One way of saving energy, though not electricity, would be to encourage the public to switch from private to public transport. This is one of the aims of a huge public transport scheme approved by the Zurich voters in November.

A new railway line and an underground station will allow the introduction of fast regular commuter trains on almost all the lines into and out of Zurich.

Other transport problems discussed at federal level are linked with the financial problems. The

police in various places throughout 1981, many of them still over controversial youth centres.

But another type of demonstration spread to Switzerland towards the end of the year – the peace protest. One of the biggest peace demonstrations was held in front of the Parliament building in Berne, but there were others in other Swiss cities.

The possible effects on demonstrations of the revised Swiss penal code – approved this year by Parliament – was one of the reasons why the Social Democratic party and others de-

popular initiatives on reducing the number of foreign residents, turned down by the Swiss electorate between 1970 and 1977.

While the issue of foreign residents will thus continue to occupy the voters, another long-standing problem – equal rights for men and women – was finally settled, at least at constitutional level.

In June – just over ten years after the introduction of women's suffrage in Switzerland – the voters approved a constitutional article giving men and women equal rights as far as family, education and work are concerned, and guaranteeing them equal pay for equal work.

But another major problem for Swiss women – the legal provisions on abortion – still remains to be settled.

In March, the House of Representatives approved a cantonal solution to the controversial problem of abortion. But the Senate rejected the proposal on ethical and constitutional grounds.

Since it has so far not been possible to find a solution acceptable all over the country, the House had favoured allowing those cantons which want a more liberal law to introduce such a law. For the others the existing stricter legislation would have been maintained.

One of the last problems to be tackled by the government in 1981 concerned possible Swiss membership of the United Nations. After many years of discussion and preparation, the government finally approved a message to Parliament in which it suggested that Switzerland should join the world body, in whose specialised agencies it has been taking an active part for years. The issue will later be brought before the electorate.

By ELSBETH DANZEISEN

Swiss Radio International

House of Representatives has come out in favour of levying a special tax on heavy vehicles, and other taxes under discussion include a tax for all motorway users.

The planned tax on heavy vehicles and a decision by the Swiss government to reduce drastically the amount of permissible exhaust fumes from motor vehicles have met with considerable opposition from the European Common Market.

The Community describes the tax as a discriminatory measure and fears adverse effects of the law on exhaust fumes on its car industries. Environmentalists on the other hand have warmly welcomed the decision.

Environmentalists, who are also among the most active opponents of nuclear energy, include many members of Switzerland's younger generation.

While 1980 was marked by outbreaks of violence to a degree previously unknown in Switzerland, there were further youth demonstrations and clashes with

mandated a referendum on the revision. It brings tougher laws for violent crime and acts of terrorism.

But opponents say a few points go too far. They claim that new regulations about incitement to criminal acts and conspiracy could be used against demonstrators.

A referendum has also been demanded against a new law on foreigners, approved by Parliament last June. The law was the government's answer to the so-called "Mitenand" initiative which was turned down by the electorate in April.

The law aims to improve the situation of foreign workers in Switzerland, without, however, doing away with the controversial category of seasonal workers – one of the major aims of the initiative.

The signatures for the referendum against the law were collected by one of the nationalist parties – the National Campaign – which was responsible for three