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Public corporations

Liberalisation

The Post Office and the Federal Railways are the two biggest federal corporations, and they must now adapt to modern requirements. Berne is about to subject them to a "cure" of liberalisation.

These reforms must be seen in the general context of overall restructuring in the federal administration which has, for example, seen the Federal Intellectual Property Office become an autonomous institution. In addition,

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the four federal armaments enterprises are to be transformed into mixed-economy limited liability companies under a holding structure, and from the beginning of next year new public management methods are to be introduced at the Swiss Meteorological Institute and the Federal Topography Office.

Post and telecom

With respect to the two federal corporations, the most spectacular measures are those touching the Post Office – particularly in telecommunications. Switzerland intends to harmonise with the liberalisation planned by the European Union in both the telecommunications market and postal matters.

In consequence, the Post Office as we now know it will cease to exist on January 1, 1998, the date on which the European Union's liberalisation plan enters into operation. It will be cut in two: the Post Office will be an autonomous entity in public law, while telecommunications will take the form of a limited liability company in public law

with the federal government controlling a majority of its capital.

The new telecommunications law – which still needs to be approved by parliament – will provide for liberalisation in two stages. For the first five years a base service, to be known as the universal service, will not be subject to competition. This will be run by Telecom SA, and it will include the public telephone service, access to emergency services, telephone booths, etc. From 2003, however, private suppliers will be able to participate in this base service.

Licenses will be awarded by an independent Communications Commission on the basis of offers.

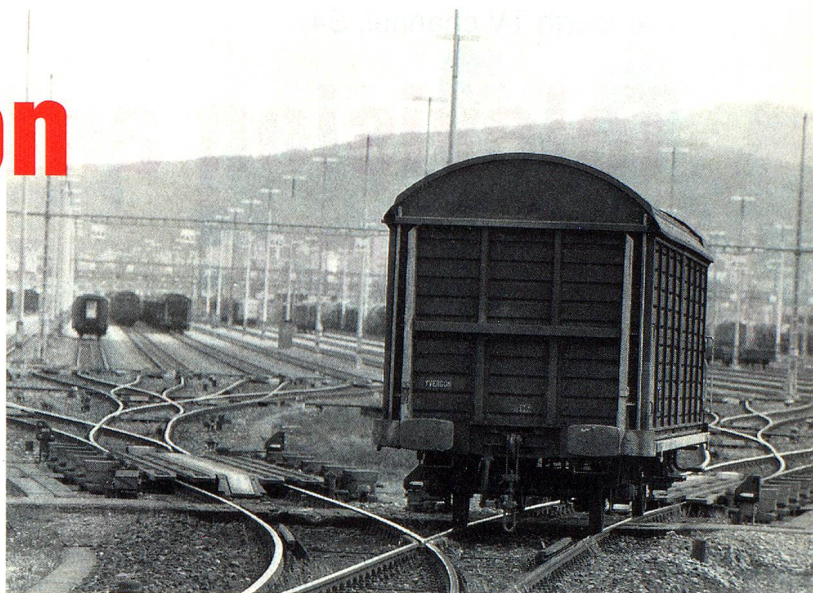
While over the longer term a very broad area of telecommunications will become subject to competition, liberalisation in the postal sphere will be more limited – in the sense that the distribution of letters and parcels up to 2 kilos will continue to be a Post Office monopoly. Delivery of parcels weighing between 2 and 20 kilos, distribution of newspapers and the payments service will, however, be open to competition. The government still has to decide in which private sector operations (packages weighing more than 20 kilos, unaddressed mail, express services, international deliveries, etc.) the Post Office will be able to participate.

The financial situation of the Federal Railways is at present alarming. At the beginning of the summer the Federal Council announced the first stage in its reform plan, which should be implemented at the beginning of 1998 and also has an EU component. The corporation will be cut in two at the organisational, but not the legal, level. Two independent sectors, transport and infrastructure, will be created. An important result of this reform will be to provide third-party access to the railway infrastructure in conformity with the conditions laid down in a 1991 Brussels directive.

The railways to be divided in two

Its main purpose is to improve the efficiency of goods transport, since free market access will compel firms to take more account of the law of supply and demand in their operations. It should also clarify the distribution of tasks between the federal government and the Federal Railways, which will have complete management autonomy. Every four years parliament will approve an agreement with the Federal Railways stating the services which must be provided and establishing a budget framework. A financial overhaul of the corporation is also planned as part of this first stage in reform. ■

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