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Autor: Müller, Jürg
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rejected on both occasions. The proposal was submitted back then by the Social Democrats, and the reasoning was the same as that of the SVP today: the underrepresentation of the party on the Federal Council. With a 26 to 28 per cent share of the vote, the SP was the party that had the greatest support among the electorate between 1929 and 1939 at the National Council elections. Yet it was denied a seat on the Federal Council.

Despite the official party line, the issue is not off the agenda for all Social Democrats. SP Federal Councillor Micheline Calmy-Rey suggested in the "SonntagsBlick" newspaper in 2008 that the popular election of the Federal Council could provide a solution to certain problems. And the young SP National Councillor Cédric Wermuth declared during the National Council debate on the SVP popular initiative in December 2012 that the Swiss People's Party would have "found allies within the SP faction" if their initiative had been better thought-out. "Allowing the people to elect their government directly is a very democratic proposal," said Wermuth. He and two other SP representatives promptly submitted their own parliamentary initiative on the popular election of the Federal Council last December. However, this differs from the SVP's popular initiative on three key points: Wermuth calls for transparent campaign funding, a financial ceiling on the campaign budgets and an increase in the number of national government members to nine.

The receptiveness of some on the left to the basic principle of the popular election of the Federal Council might lend the SVP initiative additional momentum. It is difficult to assess what impact a change of system would have on everyday political life. However, the Institute of Political Science at the University of Berne has already produced a model calculation for the composition of the Federal Council. To sum up, the most likely outcome would be the reestablishment of the old magic formula (two seats each for the Social Democrats, the Free Democrats and the Christian Democrats, and one seat for the SVP). In terms of their share of the vote, the SVP would therefore be underrepresented. The study is heavily based on cantonal council elections, and the calculation therefore includes many unknown factors. Nevertheless, it highlights the fact that the proposal could also backfire on the SVP.

JÜRIG MÜLLER is an editor at "Swiss Review"

Overwhelming support for "fat-cat pay" initiative

The outcome of the referendum held on 3 March saw the approval of the "fat-cat pay" initiative and the bill on more rigorous protection of the countryside but rejection of the proposal for a better work-life balance.

Salaries and bonus payments running into millions of Swiss francs and golden handshakes for executives have been a cause of discontent for many years. With overwhelming approval (67.9%) of the popular initiative "against fat-cat pay" put forward by Thomas Minder, the businessman and independent Council of States member, the Swiss people sent out a message that has also received much attention internationally. The new constitutional article strengthens shareholders' rights in defining remuneration for Board of Directors and Executive Board members. Severance payments will be prohibited in future.

Vasella creates impetus

The initiative was only supported by the Social Democrats and the Greens. The conservative parties rejected it, favouring the indirect counterproposal. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) was split: the national SVP opposed the initia-

tive while numerous cantonal parties supported it. The business associations, in particular Economiesuisse, also campaigned against the popular initiative. Daniel Vasella, the departing chairman of the Board of Directors at the pharmaceutical group Novartis, created impetus in the closing stages of the fiercely contested referendum campaign. He was supposed to receive 72 million Swiss francs as compensation under a non-compete agreement. Even Vasella's decision to forego this farewell gift was unable to repair the damage caused.

Protection of the countryside

The approval of the amendment to spatial planning legislation comes as less of a surprise. The adoption of the second home initiative last March indicated that the Swiss people regard protection of the countryside as a top priority. The bill approved by 62.9% of voters aims to reduce excessive development zones and thus combat urban sprawl.

The "family article", which sought to promote a work-life balance, was rejected. 54.3% of the Swiss people actually supported the bill, but it was rejected by 13 cantons and only approved by 10. It therefore failed to secure the cantonal majority required for constitutional bills. The referendum campaign had turned into an ideological battle between different concepts of family, gender roles and the power of the state to shape policy in the delicate area of the family. JM

OPPOSED TO TOUGHER ASYLUM LAW

In addition to a vote on the election of the Federal Council by the people a referendum will be held on urgent amendments to the Asylum Act on 9 June 2013. This was called by green and left-wing factions.

The asylum system and procedures are sensitive issues in Switzerland. In the autumn 2012 session, Parliament passed a resolution to revise the Asylum Act, which was declared a matter of urgency by the National Council and Council of States. The legislative changes are primarily intended to speed up the process. Left-wing and green factions have successfully called a referendum against revising asylum law. A committee made up of various organisations, trade unions and political parties is behind the move. In addition to church and development policy organisations,

they also include the Young Socialists, individual Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) cantonal parties and the Green Party.

The referendum committee hopes that a "clear signal against further tightening of asylum legislation" is sent out at the ballot box. The fact that refusal to perform military service will no longer be a valid reason for granting asylum has come under the spotlight. However, the committee is also opposed to new legislation under which Swiss embassies abroad can no longer accept asylum applications.

The amendments to the Asylum Act have already entered into force because they were declared urgent by Parliament. They will apply until September 2015 unless they are incorporated into standard law beforehand by Parliament. If the law is rejected by the Swiss people at referendum, the urgent amendments will cease to apply as early as September 2013. JM