

The new federal youth promotion law

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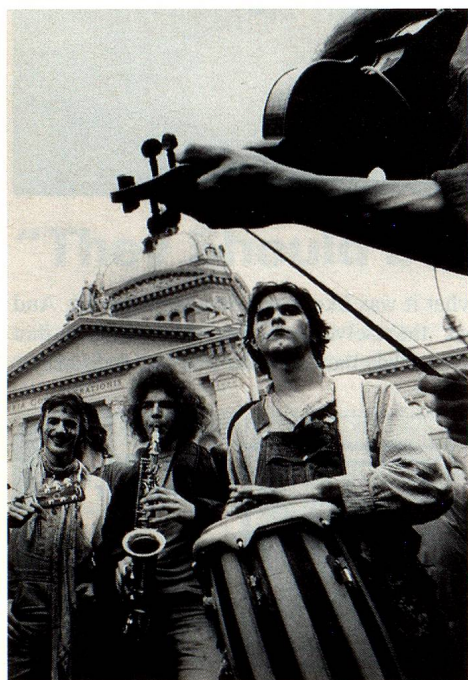
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Philipp (15), secondary school pupil

Grown-ups always think they're capable of doing everything. I also think they don't trust us youngsters enough. And they say we've no manners. That's not true – or only by way of exception. I believe they stop us doing a lot of things because they used not to be allowed to do them when they were young. I hope I never forget that I was once young.

Daniel Meier, editorial writer, young people's magazine "DIALOG"



Revolt against the system. (Photo: Michael von Graffenried)

The New Federal Youth Promotion Law

In the last few decades a number of sociological surveys on youth have reached the conclusion that today's young people suffer from a lack of practical opportunities for taking up their social responsibilities. Many young men and women seem imbued with a feeling of indifference and discouragement which prevents the harmonious unfolding of their personalities. In the absence of appropriate conditions in the various spheres of life in which young people are involved, such individual self-realisation will certainly be impossible; alongside the family, the school, the workplace and the church, we must place the youth organisations whose task it is to foster and promote youth work programmes. It is with this aim in view that the federal government has laid down the basis for a national youth policy in the Federal Law on the Promotion of Extracurricular Youth Work (or Youth Promotion Law) which came into force on January 1, 1991.

The federal government has in fact been supporting extracurricular youth work programmes organised according to the guidelines of the Federal Department of Home Affairs since 1972. The idea of a Youth Promotion Law is based on parliamentary proposals put forward as a result of the various reports on the disturbances among young people in the 1980s published by the Federal Commission for Youth Questions, as well as on the political commitment evinced by youth associations. In December 1987, the message from the Federal Council containing a draft for the Federal Law on the Promotion of Extracurricular Youth Work was laid before Parliament. This contained the basic concepts for future youth policy and youth work at the national level – for example, the precise definition of "youth" as a category, the objectives of youth policy, the jurisdiction of the federal government as against those of the cantonal and municipal authorities, etc. The parliamentary debate which followed was marked by strong controversy, particularly on the subject of special holidays for young people. However, the law was finally passed by Parliament on October 6, 1989.

The Youth Promotion Law regulates two main areas of activity: holidays for young people and support for extracurricular youth work by the federal government. The treatment of holidays for young people contains a real innovation. A provision is now anchored in the Swiss Code of Obligations by which apprentices and other young people in employment up to the age of 30 are entitled to unpaid leave amounting to five working days per year in cases where they are involved in voluntary work with cultural or social institutions, for example as leaders of group events, organisers of youth meetings, experts in youth sporting activities, participants in further training courses for leaders or people in charge of youth work, etc. After an understandably difficult introductory phase, this private law provision seems now to be well accepted by both young employees and employers.

On the question of support for extracurricular youth work by the federal government, the Youth Promotion Law divides its promotional activities into two categories: financial and non-financial. The second category includes the provision of federal printed materials to all youth organisations financed by the federal government free of cost, as well as the loan of military and sports materials for youth leader training courses, also free of cost.

The Youth Promotion Ordinance of December 10, 1990, and the guidelines on the calculation of financial aid issued by the Federal Department of Home Affairs on March 1, 1991, regulate the principles by which the annual federal grant for the promotion of extracurricular youth work – amounting to about Sfr. 4.1 million for 1991 – is to be distributed.

During the preliminary discussions on the Youth Promotion Law one of the main concerns of youth associations was that the training of youth leaders per se and youth sports leaders should be put on an equal footing. The Federal Office for Cultural Affairs took full account of this concern in helping to frame the law. It should be added that a small part of the annual credit is to be made available in the form of financial help for specific projects. This provides an opportunity for the federal government to support domestic and international projects which would not normally be regarded as belonging to the activities of a youth organisation. This means that new ideas and concepts for youth work may be promoted, such as international youth theatre exchange, programmes for promoting creativity in the fields of literature and journalism for children and young people, participation of Swiss young people in assistance programmes for developing countries, etc. The new Youth Promotion Law is intended as the foundation for a progressive national youth policy. In comparison with other European countries it puts Switzerland well in the forefront in this respect. It may be hoped that the law will be taken as a model for similar legislation at the cantonal and municipal levels.

Mario Frasa, head of the Youth Section at the Federal Office for Cultural Affairs.

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