

Federal votes on June 7, 1998 : three issues: genetic engineering, balanced budget and state security

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Three issues: genetic engineering, balanced budget and state security

Pierre-André Tschanz

The question of genetic protection is at the centre of the political debate in the run-up to the federal votes on June 7 next. On that day the people and cantons will seal the fate of the genetic protection initiative, the initiative "S.o.S – Switzerland without police snooping" and a constitutional article on stabilising federal finances.

How far should gene technology go? This question is at the heart of the debate on the gene protection initiative. Should Switzerland approve genetically-modified potatoes for instance, like those bred in Germany for experimental purposes? (Photo: Keystone)



Genetic protection initiative

The popular initiative "to protect life and the environment from gene manipulation" – the genetic protection initiative – aims to ban the production of genetically modified animals, the dispersal of transgenic organisms in nature and patenting animals and plants transformed by genetic technology. It was handed in at the federal chancellery in October 1993 with 111,000 valid signatures. Its sponsors want to impose severe restrictions on genetic engineering.

To do this they propose the insertion in the federal constitution of a new article 24 decies requiring the federation to issue regulations on abuses and dangers arising from modification of the genetic inheritance of animals, plants and other organisms, including in particular the bans mentioned above, and a very restrictive regime in respect of research and the production of genetically modified organisms.

This has led the government and a very large majority in parliament to the conclusion that the initiative would have serious consequences in certain areas of research in Switzerland; would unjustifiably impede research and development in such fields as the production of medicines and food, the protection of the environment and agriculture; and would oblige industry increasingly to move research and production facilities out of Switzerland.

The Genlex programme

While not putting up a direct counter-project to the genetic protection initiative, the government and parliament nonetheless believe that safeguards are needed in this field and a number of measures are in preparation. The aim is to extend existing legislation and fill in the gaps. This legislative programme, known as «Genlex», is expected to in-

Genetically modified products authorised

Since autumn 1997, Berne has authorised the sale in Switzerland of products containing genetically-modified soya produced by American company Monsanto and transgenic maize from Novartis.

corporate in legislation principles such as protection of mankind and the environment, respect for the dignity of animals, and protection of biodiversity. It provides for an extension of the mandatory ingredients declaration, so that this covers among other things all medicines, vaccines and cosmetics produced genetically. Animal breeding is to be more strictly controlled. Information and transparency are to be increased and an ethics commission is to be created to ensure that supervision is as good as it can be.

Some safeguards are already in existence, such as the article in the constitution on artificial reproduction and genetic engineering approved by the people in May 1992. But this article covers only human beings, while the genetic protection initiative is exclusively concerned with the non-human area. Another initiative coming from the same group calls for much more restrictive rules for the human area too. But that has not yet passed the parliamentary hurdle.

The genetic protection initiative is supported by the greens and the socialist party and by associations for the protection of nature. It is opposed by the liberal and right-wing parties, scientists and business people. ■

Budgetary target 2001

Federal finances have to be put on a sounder footing. Despite all the work that has gone into cutting back expenditure and increasing revenue, deficits have increased since the beginning of the decade. Apart from the four stabilisation programmes already put in train, and a fifth on the way, the government and parliament intend to impose restraint and discipline in their pursuit of the objective of putting federal finances on a sound footing by the year 2001. The task involves bringing the budget deficit down to some Sfr. 1 billion by 2001. The stages on the road to achieving this have been set out in a clause to be included in the constitution. This provides that the deficit should be brought to 4 billion at most at the end of 1999, 2.5 billion one year later and to less than 2% of revenue at the end of 2001.

The text, which is intended to be included in the transitional provisions of the federal constitution, does not spell out how this programme should be carried out. The federal authorities are simply

“Switzerland without police snooping”

Launched in the turbulent wake of the police records affair at the end of the 80s, the popular initiative “S.o.S – Switzerland without police snooping” was handed in at the federal chancellery with nearly 106,000 signatures in October 1991. It calls for the abolition of the political police. Its sponsors believe that there is no place in a democracy for preventive information collection by the police.

The government and a large majority in parliament consider this initiative unrealistic given the existence of terrorism, espionage and organised crime. Moreover the political police in the sense meant by the initiative’s sponsors were disbanded after the police records affair, and state security completely reorganised. The government and parliament have prepared legislation on state security which has just come into force. The sponsors of the “S.o.S. – Switzerland without police snooping” initiative and their supporters have been unable to collect the 50,000 signatures they need for a popular vote on the new federal law of March 21, 1997, bringing

in measures to maintain internal security.

The law does in fact make a move in the direction of the initiative in the sense that it bans collecting information on the political activities of citizens in principle. But federal police authorities are nonetheless allowed to collect information unknown to those under surveillance when there is a serious threat to internal security. The authorities’ four main campaigns are against terrorism, espionage, violent extremism and organised crime.

The initiative’s success – which would require a double yes from the majority of the electorate and the cantons – would not lead automatically to the abolition of the legislation on state security which has just come into force. But it would stop the collection of information likely to prevent or expose criminal activity which puts at risk internal security and – in the last analysis – fundamental liberties. The government and parliament consider this form of preventive policing an essential ingredient in state security. ■

Federal Referendums

June 7, 1998

- Federal Decree of December 19, 1997, on measures to balance the budget
- Popular initiative “to protect life and the environment from gene manipulation (gene protection initiative)”
- Popular initiative “S.o.S. – Switzerland without police snooping”

called on to act accordingly in drawing up the budget, and to identify further cuts if necessary. Parliament will be able to put off the deadline for reaching the target by two years at most, if the state of the economy makes that necessary.

This year the deficit is expected to be over Sfr. 7.5 billion; the federation’s debt will pass the threshold of Sfr. 100 billion in the course of the year. ■

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