

"Concrete solutions to specific problems instead of abstract figures"

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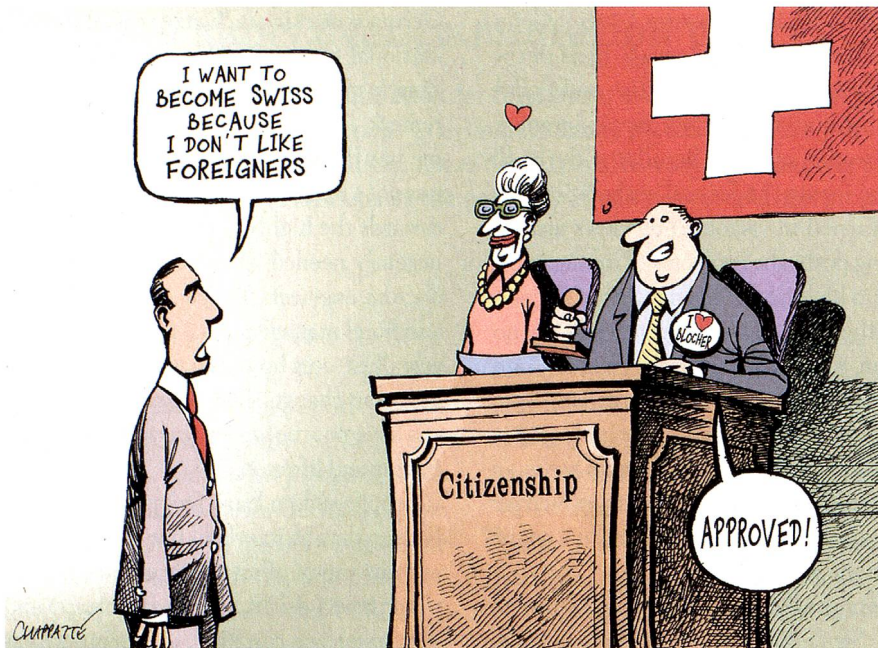
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"I want to become Swiss, I don't like foreigners."

servative regional economic and tax policies" as a grave mistake. Switzerland attracts "international companies with the lowest tax rates of all structurally strong countries despite not having enough well qualified personnel", complains the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP). The upshot is that foreign workers flood into already

overheated economic hubs. It is only really the companies that benefit from this, whilst the Swiss public has to endure the negative consequences, such as rocketing property prices and high rents, etc.

Barroom debates rarely distinguish between the various categories of immigrant – asylum seekers, permanent residents,

multi-billionaires paying flat-rate taxation, management executives and CEOs, students, agricultural workers, senior physicians, professors, and service and trade specialists. They all use the Swiss infrastructure. But to blame every problem and inconvenience on immigration is unreasonable. The growing use of residential space is, for example, primarily due to the rising demands of Swiss society, which have been increasing for years. Urban sprawl is essentially the result of poor spatial planning, and the rise in mobility on the roads and railways is a consequence of this and the ever greater distance between home and work that urban sprawl brings. Immigration accentuates these home-made problems and makes the already existing need for reform even more acute.

Simple solutions to complex problems

The focus of attention has suddenly shifted from reforms to radical solutions in light of the density stress. However, there are always pitfalls with simple solutions to complex problems. This is equally true of the immigration initiatives launched by both the SVP and the Ecopop Association (see boxes). In its dispatch on the SVP's popular initiative,

"Concrete solutions to specific problems instead of abstract figures"

Migration is nothing new in historical terms, but the movement of migrants is particularly intensive today. Professor Walter Leimgruber, Chairman of the Federal Commission on Migration, believes that an acceptable level of immigration is not a matter of figures but a question of social consensus.

Interview: Jürg Müller

«SWISS REVIEW»: *Switzerland's population stands at over eight million, around 1.8 million of whom are immigrants. Is our population too high?*

WALTER LEIMGRUBER: There is no basis for calculating whether too many, too few or exactly the right number of people live in a country. How many immigrants a society can actually sustain is primarily a matter of social consensus.

What role has immigration played in Swiss history?

Switzerland is not a country of immigration, historically speaking. But migration is nothing new. There have always been social groups who have moved around and covered large distances. In the Middle Ages, these included craftsmen, merchants and scholars. Switzerland was also a nation of emigration for long periods, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries when poverty forced people to leave.

So, there has always been migration. Why are a lot of people so concerned about the current situation?

This clearly has to do with the intensity of migration. But we also find migration difficult to accept because the notion of a static, stable society is ingrained in us. This idea first emerged in the 19th century with the establishment of nation states. It is the belief that everyone has a natural place where they live and have roots. This has hardly ever reflected reality. Above all, national borders were not perceived as such in the period up to the First World War and cross-border exchange of all kinds was taken for granted.

Nevertheless, the high levels of immigration are causing anxiety in large sections of the population. What would you say to these people as the Chairman of the Federal Commission on Migration

the Federal Council warns that the proposal is directly opposed to the agreement with the EU on the free movement of persons. The Federal Council points out that the termination of this agreement would have "grave consequences for the Swiss economy which earns one in two francs in the EU". It would jeopardise the entire set of bilateral agreements.

The Ecopop initiative could trigger a completely unpredictable dynamic. The popular initiative put forward by this enigmatic association appeals to very different groups. Ecopop sees itself as an environmental movement that addresses population issues. Restricting immigration is traditionally a demand made by those on the right. However, the goal of curbing immigration to protect the environment is also popular among some left-wing and green voters.

Switzerland is therefore facing some stormy debates on immigration that, depending on the outcome of the referenda, might have more far-reaching consequences than simply doing further damage to its image. They have the potential to unravel Switzerland's entire policy on Europe, which is already in a very fragile state.

JÜRIG MÜLLER is an editor with the "Swiss Review"



SVP "AGAINST MASS IMMIGRATION"

The SVP popular initiative "against mass immigration" was a major campaign issue at the federal elections in October 2011. It was submitted in February 2012 with 135,557 valid signatures. The Federal Council opposes the initiative, which is set to be addressed by Parliament this year before being put before the Swiss people. The initiative calls for Switzerland to set annual ceilings and quotas for residence permits. To avoid any loopholes, this would apply to all categories of immigrant, including cross-border commuters and asylum seekers. Immigration would then be possible provided it serves "Switzerland's general economic interests, taking account of the precedence of Swiss citizens". The text of the initiative states that the "key criteria for issuing

residence permits are, in particular, an application from an employer, the ability to integrate and adequate independent means of existence".

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION THROUGH POPULATION POLICY

The Ecopop popular initiative "stop overpopulation – safeguard natural resources" was submitted in November 2012 with 119,816 valid signatures. The Federal Council has yet to adopt a position. The Ecopop Association describes itself as the "only environmental protection organisation in Switzerland that seriously addresses the issue of population". The initiative aims to establish Switzerland's population at a level "where the natural resources are safeguarded over the long term". It calls for immigration into Switzerland to be restricted to 0.2% of the population per year. Federal government should also be obliged to spend 10% of its development aid on voluntary family planning initiatives in Third World countries.

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These concerns are justified to an extent as migration and mobility present huge challenges, for society as a whole but also for individual groups in particular. The main issue is fears over employment, affordable housing and globalisation. Old certainties that the economy would always follow an upward trend and prosperity would constantly rise are being dispelled.

Is this why there is so much hostility towards the Germans today? They are immigrants who are actually similar to us in many respects.

This hostility is quite extraordinary. It is firstly explained by historical reasons. We have been involved in many political conflicts over the centuries, starting with the confederation breaking away from the German Empire through to the Second World War. The Swiss have always attached great importance to having their own separate identity and not being regarded as Germans. The main differences today are in terms of mentality. Germans think that they can live in (German-speaking) Swiss society without any problems because both speak the same language. But that is often exactly where the rub lies – Germans are much more direct in the way they express themselves. They often fail to understand, for example, that when Swiss people say "yes, but" they actually mean "no". A lot of communication is required.

Two initiatives on immigration are pending – the SVP immigration initiative and that of the Ecopop Association. Do these offer potential solutions?

Both initiatives are based on assumptions that cannot be proven right or wrong in quantitative terms. There are parts of the world that are much more densely populated than Switzerland where the system works well and other sparsely populated areas that perform poorly. These initiatives are based on the wrong approach. We should not seek to implement quantitative targets but instead we should examine where the problems really lie and aim to find tailored solutions that have the support of the majority of the population.



WALTER LEIMGRUBER (53) is a tenured professor and head of the seminar on cultural studies and European ethnology at the University of Basel. He has undertaken research visits to the USA, France and Germany. A guest lecturer in Marburg and Vienna, he is Chairman of the Federal Commission on Migration since January 2012.