

City fire in Berne

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **63 (1997)**

Heft [3]

PDF erstellt am: **13.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-945311>

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USER PAYS

This catch phrase is spreading around the world like a wildfire because it is fast becoming the biggest money spinner for governments. In fact it is a misnomer as the correct wording should be "User pays twice" because government services are first set up for your benefit, using money from your direct taxes and then, when you want to make use of these services which you have already paid for, you have to pay again.

Imagine for a minute what this would mean to you if these principles were applied to the private sector. You set up your own company with all initial and subsequent operating costs paid by your fellow taxpayers. Then you would get paid a second time by anyone who wanted to use your services or buy your products. Wouldn't that be lovely! No financial risks and no worries. It would not matter if you did not have a single customer to your name, since all your running costs and your salary would be covered anyway.

Small hitch though. Under such favourable circumstances, everyone would want to run his or her own business. So where would all the money come from to set up and operate all

these non-performing companies? No worry, leave it to the experts from our governments. They have years of experience how to find money to run non-performing operations and then charge for them again. This would just be a routing job for them.

But we are digressing. The purpose of this article is to tell you that some Authorities in Switzerland have decided to even charge journalists now for any information they need to report to the public about what these same Authorities are doing. So first you pay to set up a certain administration, secondly you give them money to do a job for you and the community and thirdly you pay to find out what is actually being done with your money.

This is no longer "User pays twice", this is more like "User pays three times".

SAMNAUN UP IN ARMS

The little valley of Samnaun, tucked away at the far end of the Engadin by the Austrian border, is up in arms because the Federal Commission for matters concerning GST (Mehrwertsteuer) is recommending that GST should from now on also apply to all sales and services provided in this little tax heaven, the same as in the rest of Switzerland. (For the history behind this arrangement, see our story on Samnaun in the December 1992 issue of the Helvetia).

Strangely as it may seem, Samnaun's best ally for the moment is the Federal Council itself who opposes the suggestion from its own commission, arguing that the revenue the Government would derive from this move would almost be eaten up by the extra costs involved in setting up additional Customs posts and patrols in the area plus employing extra supervisors for the collection of these taxes.

On the other hand, the commission is adamant that Samnaun must be brought under the same control as the rest of the country. In opposition to this view, the people of Samnaun, who almost exclusively live from this duty-free trade, claim that the economy of their valley would collapse if GST was introduced as they have to compete with other duty-free outlets such as

international airports and Livigno, another duty-free heaven in nearby Italy.

At the moment the valley of Samnaun is self-supporting. The people there pay themselves for all their amenities. Contrary to many other alpine valleys, they require no subsidies from the Government. If their business is killed off, not only would the Government have spent millions of dollars to set up a mechanism to effectively achieve this, but it will also be landed with everlasting additional costs in form of subsidies to make up for the loss of revenue suffered by the local population.

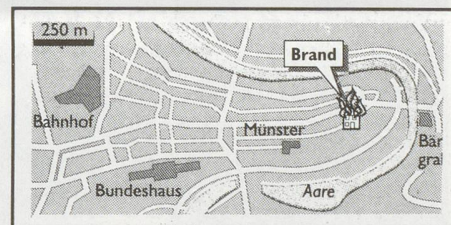
Although the tax commission is correct in principle that the same law should apply to everyone, in this particular case the Federal Council's position seems to be by far the more logical one: do not mess around with something that is working to everyone's advantage.

CITY FIRE IN BERNE

During the night of January 30, a big house fire broke out in the Junkerngasse in the centre of the old city of Berne. Firemen had great difficulties in getting close to the seat of the fire because of the narrowness of the streets in this part of old Berne. Because many parts of the old houses are built in wood, the fire quickly spread over several buildings and some 74 persons had to be evacuated in the middle of a bitterly cold night. Even Federal Councillor Jean-Pascal Delamuraz, as a matter of precaution, had to vacate the flat he was renting nearby, but unperturbed, he still went to work in the morning.

All burnt out houses were historically protected buildings which will have to be rebuilt exactly as they were before the fire. Rebuilding costs are expected to run into millions.

The old city of Berne has gone through several severe fires over the years. In the year 1405 over 650 houses burnt down in one huge holocaust with the loss of some several hundred lives. In 1575 another huge fire destroyed 43 houses.



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