

Age is no criterion

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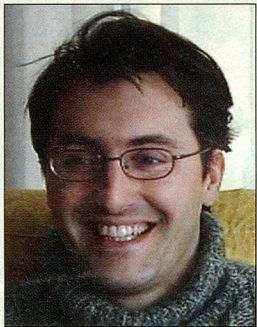
Age is no criterion

Too old at 70 to hold a political office! This was the decision of the community assembly of Madiswil, a village of 2000 inhabitants in the canton of Berne. A motion to ban anyone over 70 from political office was approved by an overwhelming majority.

Put into context, the decision was a compromise solution: the aim was to increase the restricted term of office for members of the executive from two to three terms without provoking the ire of those opposed to "entrenched seats" on the Community Council. So the simplest way to solve the dilemma was to define an age limit beyond which it was not permitted to stand for office.

If the intention behind the decision of the Madiswil community assembly was to raise the sleepy community out of anonymity, then they succeeded way beyond their wildest dreams! The news raised eyebrows around Switzerland, and for a few days little community was the eye of a media storm. But the attention was short-lived. The news was regarded as a bizarre incident with no notable impact on Swiss everyday life.

So the village of Madiswil once again disappeared as fast as it had been catapulted into the headlines.



Pablo Crivelli

"the idea of limiting the eligibility of older people for public office appears impractical."

(One exception was the "NZZ am Sonntag", which published an article claiming that age limits are also being enforced in other Bernese communities without causing any controversy.) By the way, remember Stierva? In 1997 the community assembly

of this tiny Grisons locality withdrew the right to stand for office from over-65s, but the decision had to be rescinded because it was judged to be in violation of the cantonal constitution.

Unlike the media, which rapidly shelved the topic, the senior citizens of Madiswil and retirement organisations are not willing to let the subject go and be treated as second-class citizens. The Swiss Senior Citizens' Council has announced that it aims to fight what it regards as a grievous injustice. The organisation cites Article 8 of the Federal Constitution which forbids any form of age-related discrimination.

The issue is still not resolved, and in the meantime the "Madiswil affair" has neatly thrown light on the minor and major contradictions in our society. Against a backdrop of an increasingly ageing population and constantly rising life expectancy, the idea of limiting the eligibility of older people for public office appears impractical. In an age when young people have little interest in politics and the working population is so busy holding down a job that they have no time for other obligations, senior citizens offer the only solution to the burgeoning crisis which faces many communities when it comes to filling political offices. This is especially true of peripheral regions which are most acutely affected by a drain on the population.

Many older citizens have the time and interest to serve society and put their life experiences to good use. The exclusion of over-70s from active politics is an affront, especially when one thinks of the often-expressed concern that the retirement age may have to be raised to 68 or even higher in the near future in order to rescue the AHV.

Pablo Crivelli

Translated from the German.



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