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Out with cantonal provincialism.

Parliament is aiming to crack down on federalism in the classroom and is harmonising the Swiss education system, in a move to standardise schooling from Grade 1 of elementary school through to university. If cantons cannot agree on common objectives, the government will have the final say. By René Lenzin

A “quiet revolution” is how Peter Bieri, CVP State Councillor for Zug, describes the new constitutional framework article on education passed by parliament during its winter session. The decision is revolutionary because it encroaches on cantonal sovereignty in educational affairs. For the first time, national policy will govern the educational system from Grade 1 of elementary school to graduation from university. And it gives the government the power to issue decrees if the cantons fail to implement the planned harmonisation measures voluntarily. The aim is for the government and cantons to agree on regulations governing defined areas of education. Parliament plans to harmonise the following areas:

- In addition to a standardised starting date to the school year, all children throughout Switzerland will begin their schooling at the same age, subject to the same schooling obligations, the same duration and the same objectives for individual school levels, as well as mutual recognition of school-leaving certificates.

- The government and cantons will create joint bodies for supervision of all universities. These organs will harmonise the study levels, transfer conditions and the recognition of degrees.

- Further education will now be enshrined in the federal constitution. In this area, the government will lay down principles and has the right to rule on measures to promote further education.

Virtually all cantons are in favour

This revolution is a “quiet” one because it was accomplished without any major public resonance and without opposition. The National Council approved the proposal by 176 votes to 3, and the Council of States by 44 to 1. The education commission of both councils had shared the preparatory work for this debate. The Conference of Cantonal Directors of Education was not only involved in drawing up the proposal, but expressly welcomed the move. 22 out of 26 cantons voted in favour of the wording of the new constitutional article.

Until very recently this broad consensus would have been unthinkable, since education was regarded as the holy cow of cantonal au-

sible” but did not exclude the possibility of parliament reconsidering the issue and assigning more far-reaching powers to the government: for instance, the ability to exert an influence on streamlining university curricula.

The people and parliament must vote

The new provisions must be put before voters and cantons as a compulsory referendum on an amendment to the constitution. They have a



Harmonised educational system: for the sake of parents and children

tonomy. Two reasons lie behind this sea change: Firstly, the solution takes federalism into consideration by allowing the cantons to retain their autonomy in the context of defined objectives. Secondly, it merely enshrines in the constitution a situation which has already evolved in practice. For instance, cantons are currently in the process of harmonising the organisation and curricula for compulsory schooling. And there is a growing realisation among universities that world-class research can only be financed if they collaborate and pool their resources.

The “politically feasible”

The new article on a framework educational system was prompted by a campaign launched by former SP National Councillor for Aargau Hans Zbinden. In an interview with the “Aargauer Zeitung” Zbinden expressed disappointment at the outcome of his initiative, adding that he had hoped for more extensive harmonisation based on wider governmental powers. However, parliament rebuffed the proposal out of consideration of what was politically feasible in realpolitik terms. FDP State Councillor for Glarus Fritz Schiesser described the proposal as an “expression of the currently fea-

good chance of clearing the referendum hurdle. As a result of increasing mobility, people are moving more often or no longer reside in the same canton in which they work. A majority of the population no longer have any sympathy for cantonal provincialism when it comes to education. *The referendum will be held this year on 21 May.*

The trickier part – implementation of the constitutional article by means of concrete measures – comes later. A current example demonstrates just how sensitive the issue is: After some tough wrangling, the cantons have agreed to provide instruction in the first foreign language from Grade 3, and a second foreign language from Grade 5. Both foreign languages must be a national language. But this compromise is already faltering since two cantons have opted out and are campaigning against the move in other people’s initiatives. If the constitutional article comes into force, the government will be obliged to dictate from above. This will trigger some heated debates in Berne as well as in the cantons. At the end of the parliamentary debate Anita Fetz, SP State Councillor for Basle, hit the nail on the head: “Only when it is actually implemented will we be able to see how good the proposal really is”.