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"We process and answer every letter and every enquiry"

Stefan Meierhans has been the Swiss price inspector since 1 October 2008. The former Microsoft manager became Rudolf Strahm's successor. Interview by Heinz Eckert

Swiss Review: Is your role more dealing with complaints or acting as an ombudsman?

Stefan Meierhans: Actually, I handle complaints as well as acting as an ombudsman and price regulator. These tasks go hand in hand. If a consumer complains about a problem, but does not make any headway with customer services, we attempt to mediate directly and to help out. We often manage to achieve a successful outcome. It is astonishing how little importance many companies attach to customer service. After all, customer care is the key to sustainable success in business. We process and answer every letter and every enquiry.

Is the public aware of what the price inspector can and cannot do, and what your role is?

We constantly receive enquiries on matters that have nothing to do with us. If, for example, the price of Nespresso capsules rises, we are unable to act as there are alternatives and nobody is obliged to drink Nespresso coffee. However, if the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) were to discriminate against commuters between Zurich and Berne, this would be a case for the price inspectorate. This is because commuters have

THE PRICE INSPECTOR

Stefan Meierhans was born in 1968 in Altstätten, in St. Gallen's Rhine Valley. He studied law at the universities of Basel, Oslo and Uppsala, and received his doctorate from the University of Basel in 1998. He went to work for the Federal Office of Justice and then spent six years at the General Secretariat of the Federal Department of Justice and Police, as a member of the staff of Federal Councilors Koller and Metzler-Arnold. Most recently, Meierhans worked in the private sector. He is a member of the Christian Democratic Party (CVP) and also serves on the CVP's executive committee in the Canton of Berne. He is married and lives with his family in Berne.

no fallback alternative to the train. The car is not another option.

Is Switzerland still an "island of high prices", so to speak?

Statistics, for example, constantly show that Zurich and Geneva are among the most expensive cities in the world in terms of the cost of living. Many Swiss pensioners spend their retirement abroad, where they can get more for their money. However, it is very

difficult to make comparisons. You have to remember that Switzerland has higher salaries and much lower direct and indirect taxes than other countries. The bottom line is that the Swiss have more disposable money at the end of the month than many people abroad.

PRICE INSPECTION AS PART OF ECONOMIC POLICY

In 1972, Switzerland's economy overheated. To control the situation, the National Council and Council of States approved various measures, including the inspection of prices, salaries and profits through a federal decree on 20 December 1972. With regard to salaries and profits, the role of the price inspector was to monitor developments, organise surveys and carry out negotiations. The inspector's remit with regard to prices was more extensive, as he was also able to reduce them. This power was only restricted in the areas of taxation and property prices.

As this decree invoked emergency law, it entered into force on the day of resolution. It was limited in time until the end of 1975. In the same year, Parliament decided to extend price inspection until the end of 1978, with amended powers, owing to the sustained high rate of inflation. The inspection of salaries and profits was no longer part of the price inspector's mandate, and the inspection of prices was also restricted to specific areas and economic sectors.

In 1979, shortly after price inspection based on the federal decree expired, consumer organisations from German, French and Italian-speaking Switzerland submitted the popular initiative "for the prevention of the abuse of prices". The initiative called for provisions on price inspection and price recommendations for goods and services. The consumer groups were, in particular, targeting companies with large market shares and cartels.

Parliament and the Federal Council also put forward a counter proposal to the initiative, which only provided for price inspection in times of high inflation. The referendum was held on 28 November 1982. The counter proposal was defeated by a strikingly clear majority of 65.3%, while the initiative was approved by 56.1% by the people and the cantons.

The price inspection law was passed on 20 December 1985, and revised in 1991. The prices of cartels and companies with large market shares, under public and private law, have been subject to price inspection since 1991.



Stefan Meierhans primarily sees himself as an ombudsman in his role as price inspector.

What is clearly too expensive in Switzerland?

Healthcare is very expensive, as are mobile telephony, data transmission and certain imported goods, for which prices are set by the general importers. To put it simply, prices are too high anywhere where the market does not function properly.

And in which areas does the market not function properly?

There are, for instance, still import restrictions on foodstuffs. There is also insufficient competition in the healthcare sector. The market is obviously not effective in the case of natural monopolies, such as with water and electricity, as an alternative provider is not available for every household. Neither does the market function as it should in the mobile communications sector.

Price inspection is a typically Swiss invention. Has it proven its worth?

It most certainly has. The price inspector plays a key role, and not just as an ombudsman. The Competition Commission deals with competition, whereas the price inspec-

tor protects consumers from excessive prices and ensures transparency. It is extremely important that consumer interests are officially represented and defended. We endeavour to assist everyone with a highly unbureaucratic approach. Access to us should be as easy as possible for everyone.

How often are the Internet and your blog used?

Our blog is like a virtual office, open 24 hours a day. In the first six months of the year, we had more than 1500 messages from citizens. That's a lot. Even the Swiss abroad contact us, mainly in relation to charges.

Do you receive enough support from politicians?

As the price inspector, you don't make many friends, but have plenty of enemies. Politicians represent a vast array of interests, and someone always loses out when the price inspector lowers prices.

Do you think that the explosion in healthcare costs can be controlled?

Yes, I think so, if we stop providing financial incentives for service providers to offer patients as much as possible. The price inspector will, in future, pay greater attention to outpatient services at hospital outpatient units, as particularly high cost increases have been identified here. Switzerland also has too many hospitals. It is interesting to note that it is not the elderly who account for the heaviest costs.

What have you achieved so far as the price inspector?

We have, for example, reduced postal charges and helped to ensure that public transport costs have not risen. We have also reduced the fees and charges of various community services and quasi-government enterprises, and we have helped to raise the awareness of the authorities and consumers.

What special qualities are required of a price inspector?

You have to have a strong sense of fairness and a sympathetic ear. You must be a good listener and able to communicate well with people from all parts of the country.

Jean-René Bory (1928 to 2009)

With the death of Jean-René Bory, the Swiss international community has lost one of its most prominent figures. In the 1950s, Bory began studying the history of Switzerland's foreign services, the Swiss regiments that have fought for the Kings of France, the Popes and other European rulers since the 15th century. He soon extended the scope of his work to explore the history of his compatriots in other professions – diplomats and journalists, teachers and researchers, engineers and architects, businessmen and bankers, artists and authors, missionaries and development workers, confectioners and cheese-makers – who left their homeland for various reasons, influenced life in their adopted countries through their work and created strong bonds between Switzerland and the rest of the world.

Jean-René Bory communicated on three different levels: ■ He established and managed the Museum of the Swiss Abroad (Musée des Suisses dans le monde), initially in Coppet, and then from 1978 in Penthes (Pregny, Geneva), with its collection and special exhibitions.

■ With his loyal "Amis suisses de Versailles", he undertook numerous study trips to important locations in European history.

■ He often appeared as a speaker, produced radio programmes and acted as an exhibition guide. Bory possessed the unique talent of being able to captivate his audience and inspire a love of history in them.

Jean-René Bory's legacy should be preserved and his successors are fully committed to this task. However, they will only succeed by obtaining the moral, intellectual and financial support of a sufficient number of friends in Switzerland and abroad who share the view that this work is worth enhancing and developing despite a lack of state funding.

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