

Election campaign issues : withdrawal from nuclear power - many questions remain unanswered

Autor(en): **Lenzin, René**

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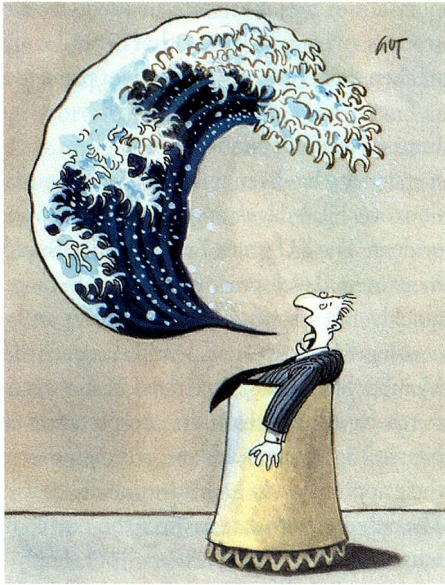
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Withdrawal from nuclear power – many questions remain unanswered

Switzerland's five nuclear power stations cover around two fifths of annual electricity production. The Federal Council plans to decommission them gradually by 2034 without replacement. Energy efficiency and the expansion of renewable energies are to meet the shortfall. The debate on the future of power generation is well underway and also heating up the election campaign. By René Lenzin



Switzerland's national government is planning to meet future energy requirements without domestic nuclear power. It is obvious what has led to the adoption of this new strategy – Fukushima. Until the reactor accident in Japan, the majority of the Federal Council wanted to keep the nuclear energy option open and commence proceedings for the construction of new nuclear power plants. However, the wind has changed since Fukushima. At the end of May, the Federal Council decided upon a gradual withdrawal from nuclear power – apparently, the four women in the Council were largely behind this decision. The government nevertheless regards the five Swiss nuclear power stations as safe enough to allow each to remain in operation for 50 years. They will, however, subsequently be shut down without replacement. This means that Beznau I in the canton of Aargau will be decommissioned in 2019, followed by Beznau II and Mühleberg in the canton of Berne in 2022, Gösgen in the canton of Solothurn in 2029 and Leibstadt, also in the canton of Aargau, in 2034.

Energy Minister Doris Leuthard said that new nuclear power stations were highly unlikely to win support in a referendum

after the Fukushima disaster. A decision therefore had to be made rapidly to enable Switzerland to embark upon a change in energy policy in good time. Leuthard believes that the gradual withdrawal from nuclear power is “technically feasible and economically viable”. However, the Federal Council has yet to explain in detail how the plan will work. It aims to set out its strategy in a draft bill by next year.

The key elements are:

- Expansion of hydropower, even though its potential is limited by already high levels of usage.
- Expansion of renewable energies (solar, wind, geothermal) and fossil-fuel-based power production (combined heat and power plants, gas-fired combined cycle power plants).
- Greater energy efficiency through more economical systems and better insulation of buildings.
- Expansion of the power grid: deployment of smart grids in Switzerland for better use of decentralised production and optimal connection to the European grid.
- Networking between and expansion of existing public and private energy research centres.

As part of the transformation of power generation, the Federal Council is promising to boost innovation in the cleantech sector and to create many new jobs. However, the alternative energy future comes at a price. National government estimates that the economic cost of power plant renovation and construction as well as expenditure on measures to reduce electricity demand will amount to between 0.4 and 0.7% of gross domestic product. Whether these assumptions and figures prove correct is one of the many questions raised in relation to the withdrawal from nuclear power. The Federal Council's plans must firstly win majority support – in parliament and among the population.

Federal Council has overcome the first hurdle, with the National Council approving its withdrawal proposals in June. A coalition made up of Social Democrats (SP), Greens, Christian Democrats (CVP), Green Liberals and Conservative Democrats (BDP) supported the plans. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) opposed the withdrawal. The Free Democrat-Liberals (FDP) abstained on the grounds that it was too early for a scientifically well-founded decision to be made.

Will the withdrawal succeed politically?

The ban on the construction of new nuclear power stations was finally backed by a two-thirds majority on the National Council. This was a clear result, but majorities are fragile. This became evident when the Council began to lay the foundations for achieving its objective. The SP and Greens want to withdraw more quickly than the Federal Council and believe that Mühleberg nuclear power station, which is unsafe in their eyes, should be decommissioned immediately. The CVP and BDP want to restrict opportunities for objecting to the renovation and construction of power stations.

It remains to be seen whether the withdrawal coalition will hold firm in the Council of States as the smaller parliamentary chamber is regarded as being more supportive of nuclear power than the National Council. At the time of going to press, it was still unclear whether the Council of States would address the issue in September or wait until after the elections. If both Councils approve the withdrawal plans and then the Federal Council's implementation measures, a referendum will then have to be held.

Will the change in energy policy work?

Switzerland consumed almost 60 billion kilowatt hours (KWh) of electricity in 2010. Federal Council estimates indicate that consumption will increase to 90 billion KWh by 2050 if the general conditions remain the same.

This would mean that Switzerland would not only have to replace nuclear power but massively increase production or imports as well. These figures highlight the scale of the challenge facing the country, especially since electricity consumption has increased constantly in recent years. In 2010, it was 4% above the previous year and 14% higher than in 2000. Additional consumption is partially explained by lower temperatures and resultant increases in heating costs in some years. However, the main reason is economic growth and population increase.

Hydropower is Switzerland's main source of electricity. It accounted for 56.5% of electricity produced in Switzerland in 2010. 38.1% came from nuclear power stations. This is the proportion that would have to be replaced by 2034. Renewable energies – excluding hydropower – contributed just under 2% to electricity generation. Half of this came from solar and wind power. While these energy sources are achieving high growth rates, they are unlikely to produce

the quantities required to withdraw from nuclear power within the foreseeable future. Switzerland will therefore probably be unable to avoid using gas-fired combined cycle plants or significantly higher imports to cover the shortfall temporarily. The issue of environmental protection arises in both scenarios as gas-fired power stations produce CO₂ and imported electricity would hardly come exclusively from clean sources.

Will Switzerland actually withdraw?

Addressing the National Council, Energy Minister Doris Leuthard was confident that the withdrawal can succeed: "The plan is essentially in place. It is now a matter of fine-tuning to ensure the specific proposals enter the consultative stage next year. We have 30 years. We must create an additional nine terawatt hours of electricity every decade. We can and will achieve this. But we must get things underway now", she explained. But where will this path take us? Will it really

lead to a nuclear-free future? Leuthard herself leaves many questions unanswered: "Who can foresee how technology will develop? If atomic fusion were to prove successful in 30 years' time and should the benefits of nuclear power again prove convincing, the law could be amended again", she told the "NZZ am Sonntag" four days after the Federal Council's withdrawal decision. However, today's decisions have to be made on the basis of established facts, which are against "new, costly investment in existing nuclear technology".

Withdrawal only to embrace nuclear power again later? That is a scenario for which neither the supporters nor the opponents of nuclear power have much appetite. The former say it would be too expensive and would involve a loss of technology that could not be recovered. The latter argue that we should never again rely on dangerous, uncontrollable nuclear power. This is an issue that will provide for plenty of debate during the election campaign.



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Conservative Democratic Party (BDP)



Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP)



FDP.The Liberals

Are you in favour of a withdrawal from nuclear power as proposed by the Federal Council?

Yes

Yes

Yes

How should Switzerland's energy supply be secured in the future?

Security of supply is a major issue for the BDP. We support both a more efficient use of energy and energy production in our own country whereby particular importance should be attached to reducing CO2 emissions. As the promotion of renewable energies allows the value chain to be kept largely within our regions, innovative projects concerning the use of alternative sources of energy with relaxation of construction and protective legislation where appropriate should be supported.

By significantly increasing the generation of renewable energies. The CVP is backing hydropower as the key resource for ensuring a secure power supply. By expanding the power grid with smart grids. Through a massive increase in energy efficiency in all areas of consumption to take advantage of the savings potential, which remains high, especially in terms of building renovations. As a transitional solution to prevent supply bottlenecks, the CVP will not oppose the decentralised construction of combined wind and gas power plants.

The FDP supports the switch to renewable energies. Future energy supply must aim to meet four objectives: security of supply, safe energy production for people and the environment, competitive prices and climate protection. The FDP's strategy is based on three pillars: larger market, a renewable energies campaign and improvement of energy efficiency. This will prevent shortfalls in supply over the next few years.

What approach should Switzerland adopt towards the EU – close collaboration and openness or "going it alone"?

The BDP is opposed to EU accession, but unequivocally supports the bilateral approach and is in favour of the agreement on the free movement of persons with the EU. In its own interests, Switzerland should maintain solid, pragmatic and friendly relations with the EU, but must represent its own interests assertively and with self-assurance. The BDP's policy on Europe supports efforts to ensure the economic and social stability of the continent as this is clearly in Switzerland's interests.

The CVP wants neither EU accession nor to "go it alone". It supports the Federal Council's policy on Europe. It advocates the continuation and extension of the bilateral approach, which has proven that it has majority support and is successful. Key elements here are the retention of our room to manoeuvre, the assurance of appropriate market access and legal certainty. The CVP regards the automatic adoption of EU law as out of the question. Termination of the free movement of persons is not up for discussion either.

The bilateral approach is the ideal path for our country. We reject EU accession. These agreements offer major benefits for our country without jeopardising Switzerland's independence. The lowest rate of unemployment in Europe (2.9%) proves that. The bilateral approach now needs to be consolidated further. The FDP rejects the automatic implementation of EU laws and a relaxation of cantonal and federal fiscal sovereignty.

What does your party intend to do for the Swiss abroad?

The BDP is aware of the importance of the Swiss abroad and is willing to listen to their concerns. As the party is still in its infancy and is not yet represented in every canton, it has not yet formulated comprehensive positions on the concerns of the Swiss abroad. This is likely to take place over the next four years.

We support the Swiss schools abroad and we are fighting to maintain the services of swissinfo. We are in favour of the simplified exercising of political rights for the Swiss abroad and of reasonable health insurance premiums for Swiss citizens resident in the EU. We believe in strong civic integration of the Swiss abroad through better political information.

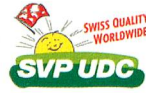
FDP.The Liberals has supported key issues for the Swiss abroad in recent years. We have, for example, constantly advocated the rapid implementation of electronic voting at elections and referenda (e-voting). A further example is our commitment to a comprehensive consular and diplomatic network and an increase in the number of honorary consuls. The free trade agreement with the developing nations is also of major significance to the Swiss abroad. These issues are central to the modern and open Switzerland that the FDP.The Liberals is striving for.



Green Party (Greens)



Green Liberal Party (GLP)



Swiss People's Party (SVP)



Social Democratic Party (SP)

Yes

Yes

No

Yes

The Greens' policy on future energy supply is based on savings, energy efficiency and renewable energies. It aims to ensure that all five Swiss nuclear power stations can be decommissioned by 2029 without a new one having to be built. The Greens also call for this in the nuclear power withdrawal initiative launched in the spring. The reduction in consumption would be more than enough to replace the output of the Mühleberg and Beznau 1 + 2 nuclear power stations. The expansion of renewable energies will produce as much power by 2029 as the Gösgen and Leibstadt nuclear power stations produce today.

The Green Liberals focus on three areas – energy efficiency, renewable energies and energy foreign policy. We are opposed to new nuclear power stations and in favour of the gradual withdrawal from nuclear power. In terms of energy efficiency, there is tremendous untapped potential. Renewable energies should be promoted in a targeted way, e.g. with the lifting of the restriction on power grid feed-in remuneration. The Green Liberals are creating the right incentives with the popular initiative "Energy tax instead of VAT". Investment is also required abroad, e.g. in wind parks in northern Europe and solar plants in southern Europe.

Switzerland will continue to maintain an energy mix in the future. The share of renewable energies will certainly rise, but they cannot replace nuclear power owing to insufficient storage capability and their dependence on natural factors. An energy source with similar capabilities would be required to meet the base load in the event of a withdrawal from nuclear power. Only fossil fuel power stations (gas, coal, oil) with their well-known disadvantages (dependence on foreign countries, emissions) are currently available for this purpose.

Our cleantech initiative provides the solution to future energy supply. The cleantech initiative aims to meet at least half of Switzerland's total energy requirements with renewable energies from 2030 and plans to reduce energy consumption through energy efficiency measures. With investment in renewable energies and clean technologies (cleantech) we will create a new, sustainable sector of the economy and regional jobs in Switzerland.

Switzerland "going it alone" is a political illusion owing to its geographical position and economic and social integration. Aside from these practical constraints, there are also good reasons for close collaboration with the EU: ecological, economic and social issues are increasingly beyond the influence of nation states. The Greens therefore support political openness. EU accession is only desirable for the Greens if Switzerland's direct democratic processes are retained.

Switzerland lies at the heart of Europe and is closely integrated with the EU politically, economically and culturally. The Green Liberals believe that Switzerland is jointly responsible for Europe since Switzerland's prosperity is based on output and international networking. The bilateral approach has proven itself in the past and should be developed further. It best meets the desire for networking as well as autonomy. However, a shared future requires an openness to different approaches.

The SVP is the only party to have always vehemently opposed EU accession. It supports the bilateral approach, but not unconditionally. Such agreements should not be about bringing Switzerland closer to the EU but about Switzerland's interests. The foreign policy of every country is based on national interests. The same must also apply to Switzerland. Switzerland has much to offer and must negotiate accordingly. No agreements should be concluded that undermine Switzerland's sovereignty and independence.

The SP wants to maintain and strengthen Switzerland's agreements with the EU. A key element is the expansion of the support measures for the free movement of persons on the labour and housing markets and in education. The SP also supports new energy and agricultural agreements and greater tax fairness, also in relation to the EU. The bilateral approach is clearly questionable from a democratic point of view. The SP does not want Switzerland to be a passive EU member without decision-making rights, but to fight within the EU for a social, democratic and united Europe.

We will maintain our commitment to the Swiss abroad. For example, Antonio Hodgers, a National Councillor from Geneva and chairman of the Greens faction, is a member of the Council of the Swiss Abroad. All our Council of States members signed the initiative for a Swiss Abroad Act in the 2011 summer session (OSA's electoral manifesto calls for this law). We support measures aimed at facilitating the exercising of political rights from abroad. We intend to set up a platform for the Swiss abroad on our website.

Being a small and young party, the Green Liberals only have limited resources available, which is why we are concentrating primarily on Switzerland. We are nevertheless aware that the community of the Swiss abroad is Switzerland's fourth-largest "canton", so to speak, and is therefore important and worthy of recognition.

SVP International, our section for the Swiss abroad, is very active and can participate on all party committees and influence their policy like a cantonal section. SVP International will run with its own lists in nine cantons in the 2011 elections. The electorate abroad will therefore be able to vote for candidates who are Swiss abroad in the cantons of Zurich, Geneva, Grisons, Basel-Stadt, Basel-Landschaft, Aargau, Solothurn, Schaffhausen and Schwyz. The SVP is fighting politically to maintain Swiss values and Switzerland's independence.

The SP wants to strengthen the voice of the Swiss abroad in Swiss politics and offers them international electoral lists to stand for the National Council. An SP proposal also calls for the immediate comprehensive introduction of e-voting. The SP is opposed to making savings at the expense of the Swiss abroad – public service aspects of consular services, the quality of the Swiss schools and top-quality information through "Swiss Review" and swissinfo should not be compromised.