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Can the people also get it wrong?

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Since the Yes vote in the referendum on the initiative against mass immigration in February, there has been a dizzying flurry of activity amongst the Swiss government, Parliament, the political parties and various experts. The issue at the crux of it all: how can the initiative against mass immigration be implemented without causing significant damage to Switzerland's economy and image? The response from the winners of the referendum on 9 February is that it must be implemented "systematically".

The EU will yield to Switzerland's diktat if the matter is handled skilfully enough, they are arguing. Rather than systematically, the initiative must be implemented "intelligently", many people are saying, particularly those in the centre of the political spectrum. However, nobody will explain exactly what they mean by "intelligently". It seems they are relying on hoping and praying. Finally, there is the group that is convinced that the SVP initiative cannot be implemented without the termination of the bilateral agreements with the EU. Two things are clear in this case: this would be extremely awkward for Switzerland and the decision would have to be made by the Swiss people.

The French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville warned in his analysis of American democracy in 1835 against the "tyranny of the majority". The political and referendum situation in Switzerland increasingly points to a tyranny of the minority. This is because the majority at the ballot box does not represent the majority of the Swiss people by a long stretch when we take the turnout into account.

A survey conducted by the Bernese research institute GfS in September showed that 58 percent of Swiss people would prioritise the bilateral agreements over the mass immigration initiative. This result suggests that a majority of the people did not really understand what the consequences of the decision would be before the referendum. It can also be concluded from this that a party with plenty of funding and a well-oiled machine supporting it can exploit democracy for its own ends in a referendum campaign.

One thing is for sure and that is that Switzerland is facing a further referendum campaign along similar lines. "Swiss law takes precedence over foreign law" is the title of the popular initiative. This was agreed by the SVP delegates on 25 October. The objective is to put national law above international law and to pull out of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

As a result, Switzerland's position in Europe and in the international community will undoubtedly be a key issue during the 2015 election year. This raises a number of questions. Is Switzerland a special case? Does it merit special treatment because it is so unique? But also: Are referendum decisions always prudent? Do the people never make mistakes?

An in-depth look at the election year, the top issues and the party positions can be found from page 12.

BARBARA ENGEL



Cover photo:
The clown David Larible from Italy was a big hit on tour with the Knie circus in 2014
Photo: Nicole Boekhaus