

Let's try to rewrite this shoddy piece of "journalism" and see if we cannot be just a little bit less arrogant, a little more factual, and perhaps more respectful of the Swiss. Here goes ... (Text in **BLUE** is written by me)

The overwhelming vote on 30 November against even more limited immigration (Ecopop); an end to special tax rates for wealthy foreigners and minimal gold reserves, enabled the Federal Council in Bern, which had opposed all three initiatives, to sigh with relief. What the government did not need were more obstacles undermining its<sup>1</sup> **Switzerland's** bilateral accords with the European Union, Switzerland's largest trading partner.

The majority of Swiss, it seems, have grasped that their country ~~can simply not function without unrestricted access to foreign workers, including qualified managers, researchers and innovators~~<sup>2</sup> **simply cannot function economically with a rigid immigration rate as that proposed by the ECOPOP initiative.** Furthermore, even if other European right-wing parties are pushing for immigration curbs, the tone of last February's referendum restricting mass immigration did little for Switzerland's image abroad.<sup>3</sup> **As other European political parties push increasingly for immigration curbs, the February 9 vote in Switzerland, which saw the MEI initiative approved, has made it clear that the Swiss people are also seeking to regain their right to independently control Swiss immigration policy.** Not only did Brussels immediately rule out any renegotiation, but the Swiss themselves felt the impact, such as the termination of the prestigious Erasmus-student exchange programme.<sup>4</sup> **Brussels' response to this show of democratic defiance by the Swiss electorate was to flatly refuse any renegotiation of the Free Movement of Persons agreement, and additionally to downgrade Switzerland's ERASMUS status to that of *third-country status*. However the Swiss Federal Government has already released an interim solution for 2014/15 which sees the effects of this downgraded status greatly subdued.**

~~Do such popular initiatives really reflect a functioning democracy?~~ **The Swiss system of Direct Democracy continues to show us what a real functioning democracy looks like - it's fluid and changing, but yet also finds it's own sense of stability and rationality, as seen with the**

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- 1 The Bilateral agreements are not the doing of the Federal Government – the Swiss people approved them and have the last say.
  - 2 It is a complete fallacy that Switzerland depends on “unrestricted” immigrant workers! Educated foreign employees are needed, but not in an “unrestricted” fashion!
  - 3 Pointless assertion – the MEI was applauded by large swathes of people around the world, as well as many political groups who are also seeking to regain independent and sovereign control of their nations' immigration policies. Those who were against the MEI were by and large big government, big banks and big business – that alone says a lot!
  - 4 The “impact” was in fact mostly felt by foreign students as they were the ones needing more financial assistance than their Swiss counterparts. Additionally there was never any “termination” of the ERASMUS programme – but only a status change to that of “third-country status” - which in itself was little more than a display of childish fit-throwing by Brussels as the MEI had not even implemented yet ... and still has not been to this day!

acceptance of the MEI but then the rejection of ECOPOP. The MEI then was accepted, the people having seen the general need for immigration control by Switzerland for Switzerland, whereas ECOPOP was rejected most likely because while the Swiss people want control of their immigration policy they also don't want something this rigid and perhaps not this extreme. Last month's participation barely drew 48 percent, hardly a majority.<sup>5</sup> Some may call into question why only 48% of the Swiss electorate voted in this round of referendums, but even that is a better turnout than the EU Parliament Elections were able to garner in May this year - that was an average of 43% turnout across the EU - not to mention that the EU Parliament Elections occur only once ever 5 years, whereas the Swiss people are called upon to vote on several items 4 times ever year! Many Swiss complain that there are too many referenda, which are held every three months. They also consider them costly. There has been concern amongst some Swiss people that the referendum's are becoming too great in number.

Often, the issues are too complicated or irrelevant to understand.<sup>6</sup> To many unfamiliar with Switzerland's democratic culture they would assert that oftentimes issues are too complicated or irrelevant to understand, and whilst there may be the case where a certain initiative does not interest a certain voter, or that a certain voter fails to comprehend the topic of the initiative, generally the Swiss consistently show a healthy interest in trying to understand and getting involved in areas which are sometimes new to them at first. This is perhaps part of growing into being a fully responsible and democratic member of society here. Ideally, one would assume that responsible citizens will spend the time reading up before voting, but we all know this does not happen.<sup>7</sup> During one recent cantonal referendum, the local electorate voted to have their council determine how many energy producing windmills were needed rather than have ordinary people make such a technical decision.<sup>8</sup>

The 9 February vote might be an issue too precarious for voters to decide. How many Swiss, particularly in the rural German-speaking parts, understood the implications of blocking EU citizens from working in this country? Did they realise that their economic well-being, one of the highest in the world, was primarily the result of such immigration? Or did they allow

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- 5 Pointless – could work against the legitimacy of the vote itself and additionally is actually not a bad turnout considering the average voter turnout across the EU for the EU Parliamentary elections was a mere 43% - and that vote takes place once every 4 YEARS!! For the Swiss voting 3 – 4 times a year on 3 – 5 issues at a time, and still turning out at 48% is pretty respectable!
  - 6 I have to say from personal experience, and in being in contact with many other Swiss voters, none of us feel that way. Yes, there may be an initiative here or there that does not immediately grab our attention, but then it's a chance to learn something new and to expand our knowledge once more. But certainly nothing to the extent that would make us call into question the entire concept of whether or not we have a “functioning democracy”!!
  - 7 Really!? Well in that case you know nothing, because the majority of people I know who vote already know about what they are voting, or they DO research and DO read the information given by those for and against. We talk together about these items and discuss them weeks or months in advance!
  - 8 And what is wrong with that? The council most definitely then consulted with professionals before making their final decision.

xenophobia regarding “die Anderen” (the “others”, meaning “outsiders”) to cloud their judgement? However, was the February 9<sup>th</sup> vote on immigration too precarious a subject for voters to be deciding on? Could it be assumed that those who voted for the MEI understood the implications of placing a quota on citizens from EU nations who wished to work in Switzerland? Did they realize that a good portion of Switzerland's economic growth may not have been possible without foreign workers? Or, as some have suggested, did the Swiss for the MEI allow xenophobia to cloud their judgment?

To understand this we have to understand one key thing about the Swiss citizen. He/she is something like your modern day Spartan – you know, the people who were born to be warriors practically from birth. Swiss children are born into a reality of Direct Democracy. They learn about it from their parents, their friends, siblings, grandparents etc .. They learn about it in school. They not only learn about it but they witness it their entire lives, so that by the time they are of voting age they are like Spartan voters – all their lives they have been training to vote, and now they can!

But not only have they been brought up learning about and witnessing voting, but perhaps more importantly they have experienced what it's like to learn about new things, to discuss and debate, whilst still being polite and cordial. And lastly they grow up learning about responsibility and what it means to live with the decisions of a democratic nation!

The Swiss electorate are arguably perhaps one of the most mature electorates in the world when it comes to honing the skills of democracy.

And quite simply, the notion that an initiative such as one to regain control over ones own immigration policy could be construed as 'xenophobic' is not much more than a desperate attempt to discredit what is for all intents and purposes a nations right to self-determination.

~~Part of this was the failure of the Swiss media and government to inform people properly about the consequences. It was a different story leading up to the Ecopop initiative with constant debate both in the press and social media.<sup>9</sup>~~

Encouraged by the high anti-Ecopop vote, a new non-partisan citizens group is now seeking to abrogate the 9 February decision by launching a popular referendum against it. ~~But is this the~~

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9 Pure nonsense! There was an inundation of anti-MEI information all around Switzerland, on every front! This is demeaning and disrespectful to the Swiss people and suggests that those who voted yes did so out of ignorance! The difference with ECOPOP was that ALL political parties, most notably the SVP, were opposed to the initiative!

~~way democracy should work?~~<sup>10</sup> This is the way that democracy works here – as we said before, it's fluid and changing, which makes this society less prone to centralized control in the way that most any other Western society finds itself experiencing control – and that is how the Swiss people like it. ~~Would it not be better to have one's parliamentarians decide?~~<sup>11</sup> Parliament has its job and the people have the last say – this is a living and breathing democracy. ~~After all, that's their job and that's why we elect them.~~<sup>12</sup> The occasional referendum may be empowering, and sounds great when explaining the effectiveness of Swiss democracy to school children, but it's not the way to run a country responsibly.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Yes! Let them have their say and give it a try!!

11 No! The parliamentarians have their job, and the rest of us have our jobs – and ours is to have the last say in everything.

12 No we don't! Welcome to Switzerland – we don't elect parliamentarians for them to have all the power that we can and should have!

13 Well that is your unprofessional, demeaning and cynical opinion – and that's about all it is.