

## COLUMNIST

Byline: PAUL BENNEWORTH

MY attention was caught a fortnight ago by a controversial referendum in Switzerland on foreigners. A vicious political debate has been raging for years now in the Alps about how open they want to be to immigration.

Of course, they are not talking about the rich types who stash their ill-gotten gains in their infamous banks' secret safes. They are talking about ordinary types trying their luck amongst the cowbells and Edelweiss.

Switzerland's buoyant economy has been largely immune from the crisis, despite relying on banking. Growth created a huge demand for labour - with low birth rates, the Swiss rely on migrants to fill their jobs.

This isn't just about unskilled workers cleaning offices or serving drinks. Former neighbours of ours - highly skilled pharmaceutical workers - from Tynemouth moved to Switzerland five years ago.

Just under a quarter of Swiss residents are foreign and unlike Swiss women, foreign women are having far more children. Almost three foreign children are born for every two Swiss.

That has long generated disquiet in some quarters, which came to a head this year. The Federal Popular initiative Against Mass Immigration held a referendum on withdrawing from free movement within Europe.

If you are working, studying, retired or self-employed, then under European Union rules you are free to live in Member States. Switzerland is not an EU member, but has a separate bilateral treaty with Brussels which established this rule.

Switzerland permitted this free movement with Europe to access the Single Market's other benefits, including free trade, access to public procurement, free traffic and science.

That last issue is extremely important for Switzerland with its eight world-class universities. That strength partly comes from Switzerland's universities' participation in European joint science activities. So Swiss universities reacted with amazement to the immigration referendum's result, where a slender majority of the electorate voted to restrict migration, critically for the newest EU member, Croatia.

Within a week of the announcement, the European Commission announced that this breached the treaty, and so Switzerland was losing its status in European Science programmes.

This is a massive blow for a country whose well-funded universities have proven adept in bringing in huge sums from European programmes.

The episode also provides pause for thought for hot-heads calling for the UK's unilateral withdrawal from the EU. If Switzerland does well with European science funding, then the undisputed champion is the UK.

Our universities are world-class on a relatively modest budget, in part because they are absolutely at the heart of European science. They are big fish in a big pond, and ready to go toe-to-toe with the best American 'schools'.

UK unilateralists assume that Europe will simply give us the status we want, and we'll be able to pick and

choose the bits of Europe we want (like science and free trade) and those we don't (restricting immigration).

Swiss unilateralists probably thought the same, that Brussels would meekly roll over and renegotiate the treaty to suit their selfish needs. So it's been a real cold shower for them to realise that they're going overnight from the world's top table of science to feeding on the crumbs.

Don't say we can pay for it all from what we'll save: our net contribution to the EU is [euro]3bn, and each year we get [euro]600m back for science. When that [euro]3bn is split across all the areas where it's being promised, the universities will be lucky to get a brass farthing extra.

A sombre future awaits our universities if we leave the EU, and unlike Switzerland we don't even have vaults full of gold to tide us over.

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