

to be clear: central authorities should have primary control, with powers being delegated to the communes. Other measures would see the merging of small communes and the abolition of the current system of cantons, to be replaced with six regions with more clearly defined powers. This measure will be highly controversial as until now local residents have enjoyed the power being able to block government plans for projects they dislike. However, with Luxembourg's population set to rise strongly over the decades to come the government is aware that such NIMBYism is not viable if the country is to thrive.

China visits



Jeannot Krecké, economy minister and Jean-Claude Juncker, prime minister flank Chinese Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan

Chinese vice prime minister Zeng Peiyan, state assets supervision commission president Li Rongrong and a large group of business people visited Luxembourg between 21-23 January. They met a range of notables including the Grand Duke, the prime minister, Luc Frieden, budget minister, Jean Asselborn, the foreign minister, Jeannot Krecké, the economy minister and they visited SES Astira with Jean-Louis Schiltz, the communication minister. Zeng Peiyan was quoted by the Chinese news agency Xinhua as talking of the great potential for development of relations between China and Luxembourg in the areas of politics, economy and trade. The plan is to expand these and move into educational, cultural and technological exchanges, and actively explore ways to deepen cooperation in finance, aviation, steel, logistics, and satellite communications. The agency reported that Juncker told Zeng of his opposition Taiwan's referendum on its bid for UN membership.

Language required for nationality

The draft law on double nationality has been published with the controversial language requirement retained. The law is designed to further the integration of the 40% foreigners living in the Grand

Duchy, but some argue that insisting on the need to speak and understand Luxembourgish will reduce the up-take. There are fears that as the immigrant population is excluded from political process important political feedback is being missed. Most immigrants work in the private sector with the Luxembourgish population increasingly looking to the state for employment. However the government was not willing to allow French or German as alternatives, arguing that the Luxembourgish language is an intrinsic part of the nationality and should not be marginalised. It remains to be seen how stringent the language tests will be. As well, candidates for double nationality will also have had to reside in Luxembourg for at least seven years and they will need to follow a course of civic instruction. A reform of the constitution will be needed, the bill is currently before the State Council but it should become law this year.

Communes for slow change

After the political parties, it was the representatives of the country's communes Syvicol who offered their opinion on their ideas for local government. They said they agreed in principal to the idea of merging communes to reach a total of around 60 with a population each of around 3,000 but they were against obligatory change. However, with local authorities jealously guarding their local powers critics point out that little would change as communes already have the right to merge if they desire. Syvicol also called for more money and the establishment of a second chamber of local representatives with veto powers if mayors were barred from sitting in the Chamber of Deputies. In other words, the communes are in no mood to surrender lightly their extensive veto powers regarding planning.

Pensions: a crime against the future

We are committing a crime against the future. A crime against children who are today less than five years old or are not even born. This was how the Green deputy Félix Braz characterised the lack of action over the growing instability of the state pension system. He reckoned the current arrangements could only continue to work until 2030, but that pensions operate over a 40-year cycle, meaning action is required urgently. Despite this he criticised the government's preference for consensus with the social partners, a path which he says discourages change. Health minister Mars Di Bartolomeo countered that there is no need to dramatise the situation saying the system must be in good health because pensions have risen 10% since 2003. He also insisted there is no need to raise the retirement age. He denied that the government was doing nothing, saying plans for individual pensions were on the rails.