

Overburdened Federal Councillors : before government activity breaks down ...

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Two new Federal Councillors

On 10th December 1986, the United Federal Assembly elected Arnold Koller (Inner Rhoden) and Flavio Cotti (Ticino) to the Federal Council – incidentally, with brilliant results in a first ballot. They take up office in succession to Federal Councillors Furgler and Egli and, like them, belong to the CVP (Christian Democratic People's Party). Photo: (from left) the Federal Councillors Cotti, Egli, Furgler and Koller (Keystone).

Overburdened Federal Councillors

Before government activity breaks down...

*Ever since the sudden death of Willy Ritschard and the early retirement of Rudolf Friedrich and Alphons Egli, everyone knows it: our Federal Councillors are overworked. What is the remedy? Prof. Hans Stark, Editor-in-Chief of the Berne «Bund» newspaper, looks into this question. **

The unexpected retirement, on health grounds, of Federal Councillor Egli has re-kindled the old discussion about the overburdening of the government executive body. A motion, tabled as long ago as September 1984 by the liberal party, called for measures by the Federal Council to «safeguard government activity». We can only hope that our overworked government can accomplish this task before government activity breaks down altogether...

One of the possibilities for easing the burden on the government might well have been pigeonholed: raising of the number of Federal Councillors from seven to nine, or even eleven. Two councillors more could hardly bring the hoped-for (and necessary) relief. An increase to eleven councillors might permit a more equitable distribution of the tasks and burdens but would hardly work without the simultaneous setting-up of a presidential department to control and co-ordinate the government's activities and the run of business.

Collegial system in danger

The collegial system would be jeopardized by a presidential department and eleven Federal Councillors, to say the least. In embryo, the office of a premier would be created, which could lead to a fundamental remodelling of the political system.

True, the collegial system has institutional and indeed also collegial weaknesses. But in a federal and linguistically, culturally and party-politically differentiated confederate state, in which, in addition, the people and the cantons are involved via *Initiative* and referendum in political decisions, this system exerts an irremissible integrative effect and is of extreme importance and consequence.

There remain the various suggestions *per se* for the administrative as well as personal relief of individual Federal councillors and their staffs and also that of the entire Federal Council. These proposals range from personal advisers; through the appointment of undersecretaries as well as increased representation of the councillor himself (or herself) by officials on commissions and in parliament; to organizational measures for the simpler handling of parliamentary business.

No patent recipe in sight

In so far as the aspect of extra persons is concerned, more «personnel» does not necessarily mean easing the burden. The appointment of the personal adviser has only partly proved its worth; above all, with a staff of personal advisers there is also a danger of the emergence of a party-political dynastic power which operates outside, and possibly against, the administration. And, with the (increased) deployment of under-secretaries, a gulf can easily open between political and administrative responsibility, particularly in the case of «weaker» Federal Councillors.

The case for «organizational measures» does not amount to much if – as with the Federal Councillor – there is the lack of a determined will to rid oneself of the trivial matters, or if – as with parliament – self-discipline and understanding are wanting, so that even for petty submissions it is always a Federal Councillor who must give account (at, say, question time).

Predominant administration

The problem of languishing government activity cannot be solved by superficial corrections. The «welfare» state of the past century, which imposed a minimum of duties on its citizens, has been transformed into a modern welfare and performance (as well as partly swollen) state. To the extent that the state's services increased – always with the concurrence of the people and the cantons – the administration grew, or new departments were created. The Council of seven had to run an ever-greater administrative machine. It must be added that while not a few of the members of this Council were often good lawyers by profession as well as being politically-respected parliamentarians, only exceptionally did any possess executive or even managerial experience.

Neglected administration mandate

According to the constitution, the Federal Council is the «highest executive and managerial» authority of the Confederation. In the past years it has increasingly neglected this administration mission.

The consequences are already evident: because political objectives and perspectives are lacking, political indifference, short-sighted opportunism, inconsiderate championship of interests, state listlessness and state weariness have set in and have spread. Of course all these failings should not be imputed solely to an overworked Federal Council; none the less, one expects from a government that it should at least finally dare to set priorities for itself and its work.

**Shortened version of leading article in the «Bund» newspaper.*