

# "Woman power" in the Federal City : Berne's double turnaround

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## "Woman power" in the Federal City

# Berne's Double Turnaround

**O**n May 2, 1993, Berne became the first city in Switzerland to have a female majority on its executive: four of the seven members of the Municipal Council are now women. This means that the electors (both male and female) of the federal city have taken the logical consequence of the events which took place at the federal level at the beginning of March. In the elections to the city assembly on December 6, 1992, the proportion of women voters rose to a record 42.5%. This has been defined as a "double turnaround".

Three women were directly elected to the executive in December, and the fourth resulted from the resignation of two male members. Josef Bosshard (CVP) had originally been re-elected, but in view of his insistence on becoming city president his portfolio was changed, leading to his decision to bang the door. His designated succes-

sor was then forced to withdraw for "tampering with the truth" – and finally Ursula Begert (SVP) took over the remaining seat.

This does not mean, however, that the election of this laboratory technician from a farming family should be seen as a desperate measure. She is widely considered as a very competent administrator and is just as well-known as her rejected rivals within the party. Together with Therese Frösch (Green Alliance), Theres Giger (FDP) and Joy Matter (Young Berne), Ursula Begert now has to show the many doubters that women are just as good in politics as men. After 800 years of

male superiority in the city government this will not be easy.

These four women – who stem from quite different backgrounds and professions – owe their election to a lot of behind-the-scenes work by other women who have been fighting for equality for years. Amongst these were the first ever woman member of the Berne municipal council, Ruth Im Obersteg Geiser, who had to put up with a great deal of mud-slinging, and Director of Schools Gret Haller, who was finally voted out of office because she was too direct. Bernese "women's power" also came about thanks to a joint Socialist-Green electoral list. These parties traditionally field more women candidates than the centre-right and now also have a majority in the municipal council, with four members.

*René Lenzin*

**The first city executive in Switzerland with a majority of women members: (from left to right) Kurt Wasserfallen, Therese Frösch, Theres Giger, Klaus Baumgartner (City President), Ursula Begert, Joy Matter, Alfred Neukomm. (Photo: adv)**



Hedi Lang, followed by Berne, Lucerne, Schwytz, Fribourg, Soleure, Lower Unterwalden, Basle-City and Aargau. The only ray of sunshine in this sombre picture for women is the city of Berne, whose executive since May of this year has a majority of women (see Box).

## Fear of quotas

The many attempts which have been made so far to speed up the movement have been without much effect. Preferential measures aimed at giving women a better chance of catching up with men have not gained significant support: the quota rule which consists in reserving a specific share of seats for women is considered extremist and was rejected

by the Lower House in January 1992. Two popular initiatives launched in 1990 with the objective of guaranteeing a 40% share for women in all federal, cantonal and municipal authorities did not attract sufficient signatures. Following the dramatic events of last March, however, the federal assembly will soon be asked to reconsider its previous decision on quotas.

During the last federal elections, the Socialists and the Ecologists in some German-speaking cantons and in Geneva presented electoral lists made up exclusively of women: these did in fact play the part expected of them and enabled a small number of women politicians to win seats in the federal parliament. But this did not mean that the tide had turned, as hoped. The 34 women

(13.8%) elected in 1987 were joined by only five more in 1991 – an advance of a mere 2%. This effectively contradicted the voluminous report of the Federal Commission for Women's Affairs which was published in the run-up to the 1991 federal elections under the title "Ladies, Take your Places". The object of this study was to describe all possible measures which might increase women's representation in the federal parliament.

## On the way out

But in the first months of 1993 this slogan seems finally to have given place to another: "Move over, Gentlemen". It is no longer sufficient to expect women to participate in politics merely symboli-