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New face on the Federal Council Doris Leuthard is Switzerland's newest Federal Councillor and the successor to Joseph Deiss. The 43-year-old lawyer is the great white hope of Christian Democrats and consensus-seeking liberals alike. She is only the fifth woman on the Federal Council and the fifth member of government from canton Aargau. Leuthard takes over from Deiss as economics minister. By René Lenzin



Doris Leuthard on her way to watch Switzerland v France in the World Cup.

The scene: Merenschwand in the local authority of Freiamt (Aargau canton) in the early 1990s. The president of the local women's gymnastics club is giving a speech. The same young woman presents a very different picture in the village gymnasium during rehearsals for the gymnastics evening. Her name is Doris Leuthard, she is barely 30, and still virtually unknown. Today, just a decade later, she's on the front page of all the newspapers. On 14 June this year, Leuthard was elected the 109th member of the Federal Council. From her roots in Merenschwand, where she grew up, had civic responsibilities and still lives, she gradually climbed up the ladder of Swiss politics.

The impressive thing about her political career is not the individual stages, but the speed of her ascent. At the age of 30 she was a schools inspector in Muri district. She was elected to the Aargau cantonal parliament at 34, and two years later to the National Council. By 2001, Leuthard was already the vice-president of the Swiss Christian Democratic People's Party, the CVP. After the party had been drubbed at National Council elections in October 2003 and Ruth Metzler was voted out of the Federal Council in December of the same year, Leuthard took over the party leadership, at first temporarily and

then – in the autumn of 2004 – permanently. And now the woman who turned 43 on April 10 will, in early August, take over from Joseph Deiss, who is leaving the regional government after seven years in office.

Down-to-earth and modern

It is typical of Doris Leuthard that she has stuck to her roots and is still involved in local associations. She keeps her political feet

firmly grounded, knows how to talk to people and can find the words to express complex issues comprehensibly. And yet Leuthard is not merely a rural conservative. She is a modern woman who runs her own legal practice, frequently travels, and has no problem communicating in Switzerland's three national languages. In social affairs she is more liberal-minded than her Catholic background would suggest, and she is more open to the interests of the business community than many of her party colleagues. She sits on the governing boards of the Neue Aargauer Bank, a subsidiary of Credit Suisse, Laufenberg electricity utility EGL, and health insurance company CSS. She must now resign from all these positions, and has already stepped down as president of the board of the Catholic Lenten Fund, a relief organisation.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell where Leuthard stands on specific political issues, not least because she has been on the executive of the CVP almost since the start of her national political career and therefore primarily conveys the party's official line in public. However, that also makes her convincing. She is the shining star of a political party that teetered on the brink and is now slowly recovering. "The CVP is Doris

Leuthard, and Doris Leuthard is the CVP", wrote the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" newspaper. The party's new slogan – "Liberal-social" – seems to have been tailor-made for her. No one embodies the Christian Democrats' new-found self-confidence better. And she has played a part in ensuring the party and parliamentary group takes a united stance on key issues, for instance in pushing through uniform child benefit of at least CHF 200 per child per month, and on the privatisation of Swisscom.

Downhill slide slowed but not stopped

Nevertheless the CVP has not been as successful under Doris Leuthard as it claims. True, it has scored a few spectacular successes at cantonal parliamentary and general elections, but overall it still loses more seats than it gains, particularly in the Catholic heartlands. Under Doris Leuthard, the CVP's slide has slowed, but not stopped. Only National Council elections in the autumn of 2007 will show where the party really stands.

Leuthard will not lead the party into these elections, as originally planned, because she is now taking over the economics portfolio – where she has important dossiers to look after – from party colleague Joseph Deiss. The most important of these is agriculture. Swiss farmers are under pressure from the World Trade Organisation to liberalise, and Switzerland wants to discuss free trade in agricultural goods with the EU. Leuthard will have to decide whether to fight to protect Swiss farmers or support widespread demands for free trade and lower prices. Up to now, Leuthard has been a staunch proponent of access – ideally completely unrestricted – to Swiss markets for European products. Now she will have to defend her stance against resistance from some of her Federal Council colleagues, a somewhat formalistic administration, and the affected sectors. Another tricky issue facing the new Federal Councillor is the reform of the unemployment benefit system, which is running at a deficit.

In 1999, Doris Leuthard married her long-standing partner Roland Hausin. He will now probably see his wife even less than before, given that her core activities are clearly shifting to Berne. The people of Merenschwand have already erected a monument to her – just in case. After all, they too won't see "their" Doris quite so often.