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Women's slow march to political power

“Move over, Gentlemen!”

More than 20 years after Swiss women finally got the vote, one of the seven seats on the Federal Council is occupied – for the second time – by a woman. The entry of socialist Ruth Dreifuss into the federal executive is a milestone in the slow march by women towards political power. For the first time this has reached the very centre of the political process.



Christiane Brunner (left) congratulates her «political twin», Ruth Dreifuss, on her election to the Federal Council. (Photo: Keystone)

When the Socialist Party's sole official candidate, Christiane Brunner, was refused election on March 3, 1993, the emotion aroused surprised all the parties, including the socialists. During the dramatic week

Catherine Cossy

which ended by Neuchâtel's Francis Matthey refusing his election and opening the way to Ruth Dreifuss, thousands of women of all ages took part in demonstrations to demand the election of a member of their sex to the executive. This was a first in Switzerland, where enthusiasm for the cause of women's lib has been rare.

Never before seen

And the movement continues. No longer in the streets, but at the polls. The rejection of Christiane Brunner, a politician who is widely admired throughout the country for her plain speaking and wide

experience, had the effect of mobilising women voters. The number of women elected to cantonal parliaments has increased very slowly throughout the last few years, but the “Brunner effect” has now led to a burst of enthusiasm for them in the cantonal elections which have taken place since March 10.

Soleure has seen the most spectacular advance – from 10% to 35%. In Aargau and Neuchâtel the proportion of women elected jumped from 19.5% to 31.5% relatively from 14 to 28%. This has never before been seen in Switzerland, where political strategists have been telling women for years that, having obtained the vote as recently as 1971, patience was now needed in catching up with their male colleagues.

Small steps

Since obtaining equality before the law, women have been engaged in a painfully slow struggle up the rungs of political power. But practically without excep-

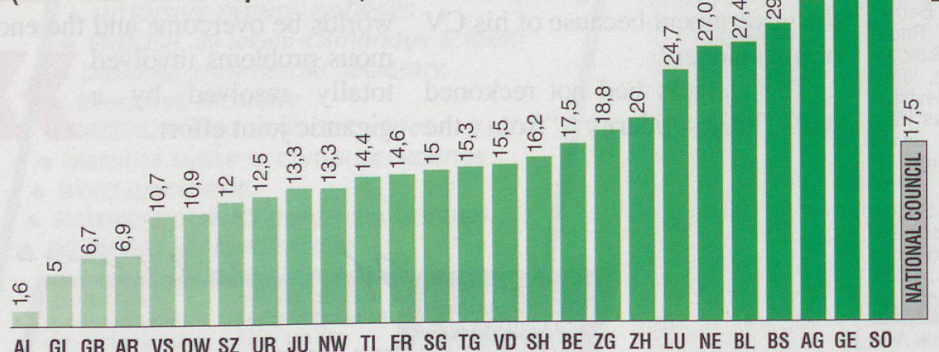
tion they are still under-represented in all federal, cantonal and municipal bodies. At present they possess 35 of the 200 seats in the Lower House and four of the 46 in the Upper House, which amounts to 15.8%. In the Lower House the socialists have the most women members (12), followed by the liberals (8) and the radicals (5). There are only five French-speaking women in the federal parliament. In cantonal assemblies women have passed the 30% barrier in only three cases, Soleure, Geneva and Aargau (see Table). In addition, women citizens of Appenzell Outer Rhodes were allowed to vote in the traditional open-air assemblies only in 1990, while their sisters in Appenzell Inner Rhodes had to wait until 1991.

In numerical terms the majority of women elected to cantonal assemblies belong to the Socialist Party, which has 196 members throughout the country (35%). Next come the Radicals with 109 (14%) and the Christian-Democrats with 91 (7.5%).

Proportionally, however, the prize goes to the Ecologists, more than half of whose elected members are women, followed by the National Association of Independents which has 40% of elected women members.

In the cantonal executives the situation is not encouraging. Nine cantons only have half-opened their governments to women, each having one female member, the others remaining exclusively male. Zurich set the example in 1983 with the election of

Women's share in cantonal assemblies in percent (as of the end of April 1993)



"Woman power" in the Federal City

Berne's Double Turnaround

On 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-

cally. The 10,000 women massed before the federal parliament on March 10 were there to remind Swiss parliamentarians of an important fact: that there is no longer any valid reason for excluding more than half of the population from exercising power at the top level. The election of Ruth Dreifuss to the Federal Council after much hesitation marks an important turning-point. Francis Matthey had to pay the bill: quite apart from his undoubted qualities a man was forced to refuse election to one of the highest posts in the state – which he felt he richly deserved – in favour of a woman colleague.

years – was refused permission by his party to serve for another four years, and a woman, Micheline Calmy-Rey, at present president of the cantonal assembly, may well be elected in his place.

The number of elected positions available remains the same, and in almost all cases where a woman is up for election the position is at present held by a man. If the flame lit by Christiane Brunner in March of this year continues to spread, the fiercest male opponents of a quota system may find themselves revising their views – with the aim of making sure that men too are fairly represented in politics! ■

Professional life essential for women's

Still not en

Do you earn enough money to cover your needs? Is your work satisfying? Do you have a voice in what you do and how much? Do you have problems placing your children in play-school or kindergarten or with the lunch-hour? Do you get enough free-time, holidays and maternity leave? Might you be sexually harassed at your workplace? Are you taken seriously at work even if you are over 50? Will your pension be enough for comfort? Does your employer offer you appropriate further training? Are you generally regarded as equal to men?

These, or some of them, are questions which women confront in their professional lives: problems which have to be addressed if they are to be satisfied in their work.

A start – but maybe a false one

When a woman plans her life nowadays, a job is usually included. Indeed it is a condition for her future independence. But much less automatic is the opportunity for qualified training leading to a job with chances of promotion. It is certainly true that more girls now take part in the first stage of non-compulsory education, higher secondary school, but that in itself does not mean that they have better opportunities of climbing the professional ladder. This depends on too many other factors, for example



Career-oriented women between two fronts: either to be as professional as their husbands or, if they succeed, not to be real women. (Photos: Keystone)

The detonator of the present movement to elect women was the fact that in their original vote members of the Federal Assembly saw no objection whatever to continuing the system by which the Federal Council consisted of men only. In Aargau, Soleure and Neuchâtel, voters of both sexes now seem to have woken up to the fact that things have changed. Male candidates – and this includes those who had been quite prepared to work in favour of women's rights – have found themselves on the touch-line. In Geneva, socialist executive member Christian Grobet – who has been in the government for the last 12

Interview

Slow progress to equality

Swiss Review talks to Claudia Kaufmann, head of the Federal Bureau for Equality between Men and Women.

Swiss Review: Ms. Kaufmann, let's start with an explosive matter: equality of pay. What is the situation in Switzerland?

Claudia Kaufmann: We still have an average pay difference of about 30%. We do not (yet) have any active policy aimed at wage equality. Just think of it –

since equality of the sexes was inscribed in the Constitution in 1981 there have been only 15 court cases about pay. Neither employers nor trades unions seem to realise they have new responsibilities in working out wage contracts. The law on equality between the sexes is mired in parliamentary procedure – although in most European countries all this belongs to the past. Let's hope it will go through without too much trouble.

SR: And equality of opportunity?

CK: There will be no wage equality without equality of opportunity. In international terms the most progressive countries are those which have taken broad steps towards equality of opportunity with comprehensive measures in tax policy, social services and child