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Elections 1995: Portraits of the parties (III)

Social Democrats: On the back of proportional representation

The Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SPS) is the second strongest party in the country, with a 19% share of voters. In the National Council and the Council of States it comes in third place, with 46 seats. The SPS has been represented in the Federal Council without a break since 1959.

1959 was a decisive year in Swiss politics. It was then that the so-called "magic formula" for the composition of the Federal Council was first applied. This expressed the wish of

Giuseppe Rusconi

the big centre-right parties and the Social Democrats to work together at the highest level.

The SPS was founded on October 21, 1888, at the Workers' Congress in Berne at which about 60 Socialist and Grutli Societies (left-radical trades union associations) took part. But it was not until 1907 that the first seven Social Democrats, headed by Hermann Greulich, entered the National Council, and it was only in 1919 when 41 members were elected to the lower house that the party first gained an important position in Swiss politics. That was the year in which the first elections took place under the proportional system, which had been introduced as a result of an SPS initiative.

The SPS broke away from the Communists in 1921, and in 1929 it demanded representation in the government for the first time. This was without success, as was a second demand nine years later. The party saw electoral triumph in 1943 when it obtained 56 of the 194 seats. This success, together with the atmosphere of national unity prevailing at the time, led to the election of Ernst Nobs to the Federal Council as the first ever Social Democrat member. He was succeeded by his party comrade, Max Weber (1952-54).

The SPS maintained its position as the strongest party from 1931 to 1983, when it was displaced by the Liberal Democrats. In the last 20 years, however, the number of its parliamentarians has dropped substantially, from

55 in 1975 to 43 in 1991. In the Council of States, in which the small rural cantons have a dominant position, the SPS at present has only 3 seats. But its fortunes do seem to be on a slight rise once more. In the 1991 federal elections the SPS was the strongest party in the cantons of Basle City, Geneva, Glarus, Neuchâtel and Schaffhausen, while coming second in Aargau, Basle Rural, Berne, Fribourg, Grisons, Vaud and Zurich.

The basic question of the party's presence in the Federal Council has been repeatedly a matter of controversy within its own ranks, most recently two

**Will they still be laughing after the elections?
Federal Councillor Otto Stich, Party Chairman Peter Bodenmann and head of the parliamentary group Ursula Mauch.
(Photo: Rieben)**



years ago when a successor to René Felber had to be elected. Although several thousand women demonstrated in front of parliament, the SPS official candidate, Christiane Brunner, had to give way to "compromise candidate" Ruth Dreifuss. Looking ahead to the period after the next election, abolition of the "magic formula" – which guarantees the SPS its two seats in the Federal Council – and a switch to a government made up exclusively of the centre right is at present being considered.

In some policy areas it is often very difficult for the Liberal Democrats and the Christian Democrats to find com-

mon ground with the SPS. There are, for example, differences in economic policy, where the SPS is in favour of more government intervention; on social security, which they would like to extend further (unemployment indemnities, sickness insurance, the state pension scheme); and on military matters, whose importance they would like to reduce substantially (a referendum is due soon on an initiative to halve military expenditure).

Other areas in which the Social Democrats have particularly strong views are representation of women in politics by means of the famous quota system and drug policy. In spite of resistance from a number of SPS sections in French-speaking Switzerland, the party is demanding an extension of the controversial distribution of heroin and decriminalisation of the consumption and purchase of drugs for one's own use.

Today the Social Democratic Party seems to be less splintered than it used to be, when a more pragmatic trades union wing prepared to compromise was faced with a "more emotional" one which harked back to the events of 1968. Today, Peter Bodenmann – who represents the second of these groups – has taken over as head of the party in succession to trades unionist Helmut

Hubacher. Not all points of friction have been entirely smoothed over, but today's differences are much less important in comparison with the megaphone polemics of the last few decades. For this reason, and also because of present economic and social conditions, the SPS will enter the 1995 election fray with considerable confidence and the hope that they will be able to increase their share of votes. ■

Social Democratic Party (SPS)

Founded: 1888; Members: about 40,000
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