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Bitter farewell for Ruth Dreifuss

BY PABLO CRIVELLI

The last parliamentary appearance of retiring Federal Councillor Ruth Dreifuss ended in defeat when the National Council rejected her proposed reform of the Health Insurance Bill.

REJECTION OF A BILL in its final voting stage is relatively unusual. But this time the National Council had a nasty surprise up its sleeve for the Social Democratic Federal Councillor on the occasion of her last appearance in parliament: at the close of the winter session the Liberal Democrats, SVP and some members of the CVP voted by a narrow majority (93 to 89 with 5 abstaining) to reject the revision of the Health In-

surance Bill. Following a parliamentary marathon which tested the endurance of MPs and the patience of journalists, this bill now goes back to the Council of States for reconsideration.

It must be emphasised that the result of this vote was a veritable slap in the face for Ruth Dreifuss, since up to that point she had succeeded in holding on to certain social aspects of the bill which were close to her heart. What prompted MPs to reject the bill? According to FDP faction head Fulvio Pelli, in its present form it would have entailed high costs for the health insurance system. A majority of Social Democrats and Greens as well as several centre-right representatives (particularly Christian Democrats) spoke out against the abolition of current provisions which oblige health insurance companies to compensate all doctors. Were this obligation to be lifted, health insurance companies would be able to compensate only doctors specifically approved by them. For centre-right representatives, granting this level of competence to health insurance

companies is the best way to keep a tighter rein on healthcare costs. For opponents of the system, lifting the obligation would give health insurance companies and cantons too much power and set patients adrift.

Maternity insurance

Despite this setback for Federal Councillor Dreifuss, the National Council voted by a large majority (129 to 27) in favour of a parliamentary initiative for a 14-week maternity leave on 80 percent of normal pay, financed by the loss-of-earnings fund. The initiative implements a 57-year-old constitutional mandate! The provision on maternity leave still requires the approval of the Council of States before entering into force.

Second Gotthard road tunnel?

Among other pressing business handled by the National Council was the project, proposed by the National Council's Transport Commission, for a second Gotthard tunnel as a counterproposal to the Touring Club of Switzerland's "Avanti" initiative, and the parliamentary initiative to rehabilitate all persons who have been tried for aiding and abetting refugees during the Nazi regime.

No gifts for the needy

During the winter session the Council of States approved the 11th revision of the AHV, which is designed to cut costs by CHF 1 billion a year i.e. twice as much as the National Council had defined. But these savings come at a price: people on a low income who decide to retire before age 65 will receive no financial concessions. If a person retires at age 62, he or she will be obliged to accept a 19 percent drop in pension. The law also brings the pensionable age for women into line with the pensionable age for men i.e. 65.

On the issue of agricultural law, the Council of States also approved a gradual liberalisation of the milk market between now and 2009.

Translated from the German.



Despite the explosion in healthcare costs, the National Council has thrown out the proposal to revise the Health Insurance Bill.