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Micheline Calmy-Rey new member of the Federal Council

BY PABLO CRIVELLI

The new Social Democrat Federal Councillor is Micheline Calmy-Rey. Hers was an easy victory, despite the SVP's wild-card candidate Toni Bortoluzzi.

Michael Stahl



MICHELINE CALMY-REY, former Geneva State Councillor, won an easy victory over her fellow contenders. Even Solothurn-born Ruth Lüthi, the second Social Democrat candidate who has lived in the canton of Fribourg for 30 years and is a Fribourg State Councillor, posed no threat to her party colleague. Although both candidates fulfilled the criteria for the successor to Ruth Dreifuss, Calmy-Rey was the favourite for a Federal Council post from the outset. Her party committee stated categorically that the second SP representative in the cabinet had to be a woman from French-speaking Switzerland – a region with a loyal SP electorate.

A true "French-Swiss"

This stand triggered a heated and, at times, surreal debate on what exactly characterised a "Romand". Several National Councillors and journalists from French-speaking Switzerland believed that the mannerisms and accent of Ruth Lüthi betrayed her German-Swiss roots, despite the fact that she speaks fluent French and has lived in Francophone Switzerland for many years. The Swiss-German press as well as various French-speaking commentators decried this prejudicial view which laid more emphasis

on ethnic origin than capability. Some political commentators even dared to suggest that the Lüthi candidature was prompted by an ulterior motive: to unite as many votes as possible behind Calmy-Rey, who apart from being the favourite was a "true" Francophone as well as a Swiss from Geneva (a canton which feels neglected by Berne). Lüthi was further hampered by another factor: Joseph Deiss, former Foreign Minister and now Head

of the Department of Economic Affairs, is also from Fribourg. Although the implicit ban against dual representation of a canton on the Federal Council is no longer in force, this fact damaged Ms Lüthi's chances. The only candidate who could have posed a genuine threat to Calmy-Rey was Patrizia Pensi, another State Councillor from the Ticino. But the SP opted to clear the way for Calmy-Rey to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

Magic formula intact

If the SP's gamble paid off, it was because the CVP and FDP had to contend with internal party problems and more or less resigned themselves to the outcome.

Moreover, Toni Bortoluzzi, the "wild card" proposed by the SVP in a move to circumvent the "magic formula" and redefine the balance of power in the Federal Council, had not the slightest chance of success. Nevertheless the election offered the SVP an opportunity to talk up next year's election campaign. In view of the party's numerical strength, the SVP has long been calling for a second seat on the Federal Council and a more conservative policy. However, the idea of another seat for the SP found no favour with the CVP and FDP, since in their opinion it would disturb the equilibrium. This year, once the federal elections have been held and Kaspar Villiger (FDP) has retired, the SVP is planning another attempt to crack the magic formula which, since 1959, has assigned government posts according to a predefined ratio: 2 SP, 2 CVP, 2 FDP and 1 SVP. If it fails to wrest a seat from the SP, the SVP could steal a Federal Council seat from the CVP, which for some time has been losing ground.

Experienced politician

Micheline Calmy-Rey, the new SP Federal Councillor, is a highly experienced politician. Originally from the Valais, she is 57 years old and the mother of two grown-up children.

Micheline Calmy-Rey is regarded as an untiring worker with outstanding strength of character. As Director of Finance she brought the canton of Geneva's finances back on track and decreased taxes for persons with lower incomes. At the beginning of this year she took over her new post as Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

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