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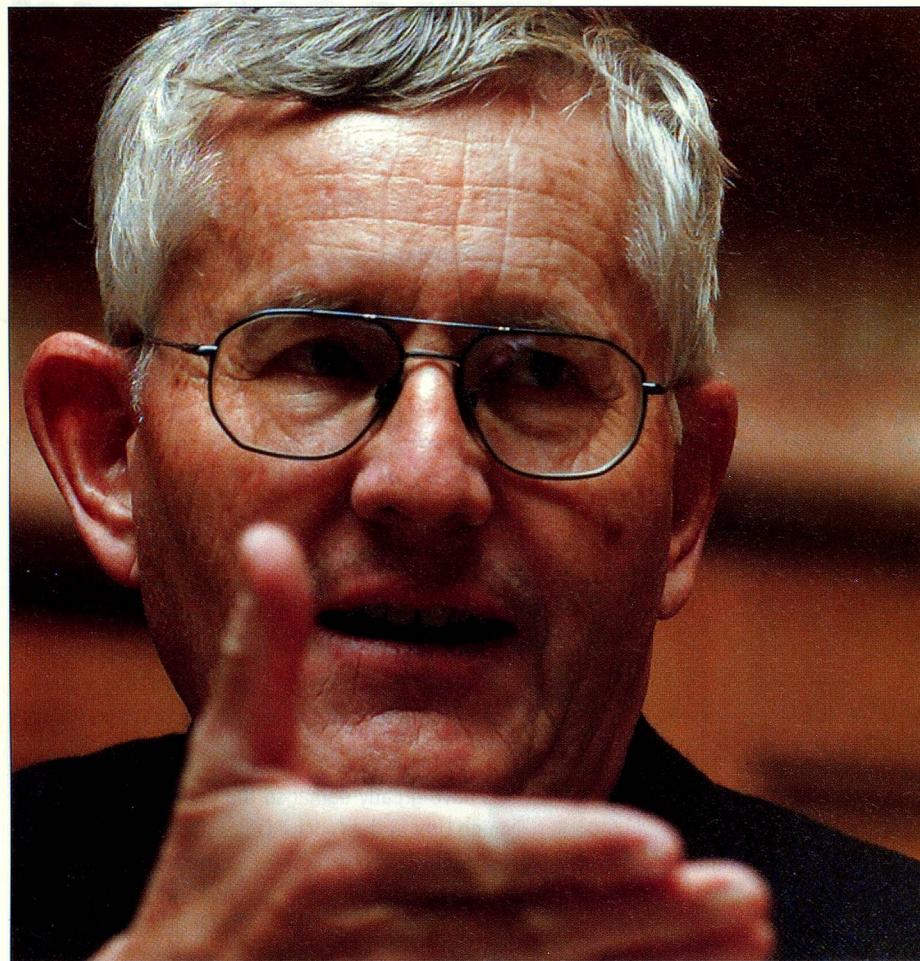
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Goodbye, Kaspar Villiger!



Keystone Press

Federal Councillor Kaspar Villiger leaves the political stage.

Kaspar Villiger, Minister of Finance, is retiring at the end of this year after almost fifteen years on the Federal Council.

THE DECISION not to stand for re-election came as no surprise. Indeed, last year it was widely prophesied that Radical Free Democrat Kaspar Villiger would retire at the same time as Social Democrat Federal Councillor Ruth Dreifuss. After much reflection, the Minister of Finance from Lucerne announced that he would stay until the end of 2003 in order to bring to resolution certain issues which were particularly important to him. Finally, on Tuesday, 16 September, the President of the Federal Assembly advised

members that he had received a letter from Federal Councillor Villiger, tendering his resignation from the executive. At the follow-up press conference, the 62-year-old took positive stock of his term in office, although he admitted that not everything had turned out as he had wished. Asked to sum up his political style, the Federal Councillor responded that he had always acted with respect, "primarily to avoid harming minorities in the bid to find consensus and constructive solutions." This explains his popularity and the flattering comments from his fellow politicians praising his public spirit, broad knowledge of key issues, earnestness, communication skills, and ability to negotiate a compromise. According to Villiger, in a country as heterogeneous as Switzerland there can be no political life without dialogue.

Highs and lows

In February 1989 Villiger was elected as the successor to Elisabeth Kopp, following her resignation. Villiger studied engineering and for many years was active in the family bicycle and cigar manufacturing businesses. His Federal Council duties began at the Ministry of Defence, followed by eight years at the Department of Finance. He was twice elected as President of the Federal Assembly, in 1995 and 2000. At the Department of Finance he was in charge of the long overdue army reform (Army 95), rendered necessary following the fall of the Berlin wall. Directly after joining the Ministry of Defence, Villiger was faced with the thorny issue of the secret organisations P 26 and P 27. The success of the vote against the people's initiative to decommission the army was partly overshadowed by the rejection of the proposed "blue helmet" battalion in 1994. Villiger's track record on finances is mixed. Although he continually preached financial thrift, he leaves behind a public debt of CHF 122 billion: CHF 35 billion more than his predecessor, Social Democrat Otto Stich. Nevertheless, it should be noted in his defence that parliament did not always make his life easy. Villiger goes into retirement without realising his target of turning around the state funds. But the Federal Councillor has also scored a number of successes, in particular by defending the country's banking secrecy laws during the bilateral negotiations with the EU. The high point of his career was undoubtedly reached when, as Federal President, he declared Switzerland's full membership of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

No plans for the future

Asked about his future after January 2004, Villiger replied that he had no definite plans as yet, since his agenda was still so full that he had had no time to plan for it. In any event, he continued, it was possible "that you will no longer see me in a public capacity." Perhaps a few lucky people will come across him on his cycling tours in the Verzasca valley.

Pablo Crivelli

Translated from German.