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Blocher and Merz join Government

Ueli Hiltbold



As Christoph Blocher (right) blinks in the limelight, Hans-Rudolf Merz wipes away a tear.

Democratic centrist Christoph Blocher and radical Hans-Rudolf Merz are the new faces in the Federal Council, which was elected on 10 December. By choosing a second UDC member to replace Christian Democrat minister Ruth Metzler, Switzerland's Federal Assembly has broken a political balance of 44 years' standing (see "editorial" page 3).

1959 was the year which saw the introduction of the "magic formula" for electing the Executive. Ever since, the political balance on the Federal Council had remained unaltered. Until now, the Government consisted of two radicals (PRD), two socialists (PS), two Christian Democrats (PDC) and one member of the Democratic Union of the Center. From now on, things will be different: the UDC has won a second seat, at the PDC's expense. Federal Councillor Ruth Metzler, 39, was elected to office just four years ago and headed the Federal Police and Justice Department. But her term has not been renewed – the first time in 130 years that a serving minister has not been re-elected. Ruth Metzler paid the price of her party's defeat at the re-

cent federal polls, which were a victory for the UDC. The PDC is now the weakest governing party, holding just 14% of votes cast. The UDC, with roughly twice as many votes, is now the largest party in the Swiss parliament, in terms of seats, ahead of the socialists and radicals. Since the membership of the Federal Council reflects the parties' electoral support, UDC claimed a second seat on the Federal Council. Christoph Blocher, from Zurich, has been chosen to serve. He has sat in parliament since 1979 and is not only Switzerland's best-known politician, but also the author of the UDC's electoral success. To put pressure on the other political groupings, the UDC threatened to switch to the opposition if Blocher were not elected.

Despite the declared opposition of the left and the PDC, which defended its two seats in the government to the last, a majority of parliamentary deputies followed the UDC's voting recommendations. Thus the Federal Council election proceeded smoothly, despite many predictions of chaos resulting from block voting by parties in no mood for compromise. The votes were counted in just over four hours. The Federal Assembly had resoundingly re-elected UDC's Samuel Schmid, socialists Moritz Leuenberger and Micheline Calmy-Rey, radical Pascal Couchepin and Ruth Metzler's party colleague Joseph Deiss, who will serve as Federal President next year. This is a twist of fate, since the honor would have been due to Ruth Metzler.

The answer to the question whether the UDC would manage to unseat a PDC member from government emerged only in fits and starts. Thus the election of a new Federal Councilor to replace the outgoing Kaspar Villiger seemed almost a side-show. The PRD fielded two candidates: Member of the upper chamber Hans-Rudolf Merz from Appenzell and ex-member of the upper chamber Christine Beerli from Bern. Merz won by an easy margin. Member of the National Council Cécile Bühlmann (Green Party) had called upon the Federal Assembly to elect a woman, but her appeal fell on deaf ears. At present the only woman sitting on the Federal Council is Micheline Calmy-Rey.

After the election of Christoph Blocher (63), the choice of Hans-Rudolf Merz (61) further underlines the Federal Council's shift to the right. Indeed, if the National Councilor from Zurich were elected, many had thought Christine Beerli would make it too. Since Beerli is seen as part of the PRD's "more social" wing, she might have counterbalanced Blocher. Merz and Blocher are both thought to be close to business circles. Of the two, Blocher is certainly the more controversial. He owns Ems-Chemie and is one of Switzerland's richest men. A conservative, he has been critical of Switzerland's "political class" for years. He has set his sights on Switzerland joining the European Union and NATO, and is firmly opposed to an "excess" of foreigners and asylum-seekers. He has campaigned hard on these issues, notably by forming the Association for a Neutral and Independent Switzerland.

Pablo Crivelli 

Translated from Italian.