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Autor: Blocher, Christoph / Keller, Gabrielle
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Patrick Lüthy



Christoph Blocher: "The electorate is not stupid"

Since Christoph Blocher was appointed to the Federal Council, opponents and media have repeatedly accused him of violating the rules of collegiality and continuing to politicise as if he were leader of the opposition. But in an interview with "Swiss Review", he explains that he is merely fighting for transparent communication and freedom of expression.

Swiss Review: You have been a member of the Federal Council now for a year. Has anything in particular impressed you during your time in office?

Christoph Blocher: No, nothing (laughs). Even before I joined the government, I recognised that we were suffering from economic stagnation and was aware of the perilous state of our federal finances. So far, I would say that this is the area in which we have made the least progress. Moreover, I am still concerned about the deep rift opening up between our population and the political elite. Switzerland is not the only one to suffer from this problem: our European neighbours are also struggling to surmount it. Voters mistrust politicians. That is a sorry state of affairs, especially in a country like Switzerland where direct democracy plays such an important role. That's why I deliberately take an opposing stance and fight for transparent communication and for the freedom to express or oppose opinions. In this respect we have made some headway, but that doesn't happen without upsets.

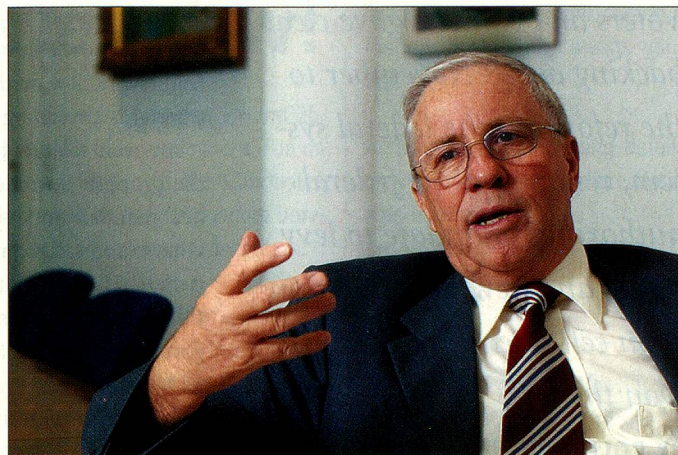
What kind of upsets?

Well, the fact that politicians can stand before the media after referenda and rebuke

the electorate beggars belief! Yet after two proposals on naturalisation were rejected by voters, I was slated by journalists and politicians for saying that the electorate had made a sovereign decision which should be respected, and that it was now up to us to do the job we were elected to do.

Is it not part of the government's task to explain voters' decisions? Or is that up to the media?

One mustn't dismiss voters as being stupid! At the end of the day, they are no more stupid than the parliament and government that represent them! In contrast to the 1970s, the media nowadays are generally strongly pro-government, and most of them share the same opinion. For example: in the two votes for facilitated naturalisation, 56.8 and 51.6 percent of the electorate voted "No". This decision could be regarded as regrettable, although I have no objection to it. But then virtually all the media turn on these voters and accuse them of being anti-foreigner and racist, laying the blame for this decision on the advertisements published by the SVP and Blocher. They scold the electorate like a teacher telling off her class. It occurs to no-one to examine the decision objectively. That is not only worry-



ing, but also unsettling for voters. Lots of voters feel that Berne no longer represents their interests. The Swiss press has substituted diversity of headlines for diversity of opinion.

You are also unlike the majority of journalists in that you represent an anti-European position. But how can Switzerland achieve an economic profile in the international community? Isn't there a contradiction between Blocher the politician and Blocher the former entrepreneur?

No, not at all. As a businessman I moved in a globalised environment. 92 percent of our production was sold abroad. But I knew that we had to think globally and act locally. The value of our independence and neutrality is in no way inconsistent with the globalised world. The stronger the globalisation, the more important the need to act independently, otherwise one is gobbled up. That goes for politics too: it's essential to think internationally, but we must not allow this to inhibit our actions. We must preserve our national sovereignty.

The last Congress of the Swiss Abroad discussed our country's international position in the field of technology. Swiss Abroad are concerned about the way Switzerland is gradually losing its lead position. Where does the problem lie?

This is a genuine concern. On the one hand, research activities are heavily restricted – you only have to think of gene technology. Switzerland is falling behind

not only by comparison with other European countries: the major competitor is America. Our country could circumvent the mistakes made by other European countries, but it is simply not leveraging this opportunity. So lots of research scientists simply go to the USA. This is not helped by the high taxes and charges imposed by our country. Such taxes represent cash taken out of economic circulation. So, naturally, there is less money available for research and development.

You used to be attacked by the media as an opposition politician, now the same is happening with you as Federal Councillor. The media are none too gentle with their criticism. How do you handle this on a personal level?

Practice makes perfect. When I was young, it affected me more than now. After all, no-one is accusing me of theft, being a spendthrift, or doing my job badly or not at all. I am attacked because of my political views. The same is true when the attacks are personal. It is not as if I have no supporters. I came out of many elections as the National Councillor in Switzerland with the most votes. Is it not comforting to see how little the media can affect such outcomes? Ultimately, the public is perfectly capable of making up its own mind. Only people with no personality have no opponents. Also, a person exposed to as much criticism as I am makes fewer mistakes. One learns to view criticism as an opportunity. I have a very positive view of criticism.

Swiss Abroad feel more attached to their homeland than many Swiss in Switzerland – and the majority are in favour of EU membership. How do you explain that?

The majority of Swiss Abroad live in the EU. They are swayed by very practical arguments. They are not too worried about the drawbacks of EU membership. Nor would they be too bothered if Switzerland increased VAT from 7.6 to 15 percent. It's different with Swiss living overseas, who are highly sceptical about opening up to Europe.

The SVP opposes EU membership and was also against the EEA. Are the bilateral accords a long-term alternative?

Yes, if they serve the purpose of cosmopolitanism and are not a form of salami tactics.

What is your message to Swiss Abroad?

They are often called ambassadors for our country. But I'm a little reluctant to use this label, since we should not simply degrade them to messenger status. Swiss who achieve success abroad do not do so because they are Swiss Abroad, but because they have performed their mission well. Because Switzerland is so small, personal contact between Switzerland and abroad is very valuable.

Interviewer: Gabrielle Keller

Translated from German.