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Step-by-step politics

IT HAS NOW BEEN TWO YEARS SINCE THE SWISS PEOPLE'S PARTY (SVP) won the National Council elections for the second time (the first victory being in 1999). This result led to the appointment of Christoph Blocher to the Federal Council and to CVP Federal Councillor Ruth Metzler being voted out of office.

The 2003 parliamentary elections and the new distribution of seats on the Federal Council caused a furore in the Swiss media. There was talk of a "right-wing shift", and the media uproar was not without impact on the public. Studies showed that public confidence in the government had dropped to a historic low by mid-2004 and, in the aftermath of the elections, seven consecutive government proposals were given short shrift by the public while a people's initiative by the opposition was duly accepted. As the most frequent winner of referenda, the Left duly celebrated the fact that a majority vote on people's initiatives was virtually impossible without its support.

Had elections been held last autumn – two years before the next parliamentary elections – the Left would have gained a few more seats, the Greens would have kept their place to the left of the SP on the opposition benches, the SVP would have remained the strongest party, the CVP would have kept its seats, and the FDP would have lost more seats. Moreover, according to the "2005 Election Barometer" – a study by the Bernese research institute gfs – 52 percent of the population remains mistrustful of the government.

Fears of the "right-wing shift" touted by the media were unfounded and, thanks to the Swiss system of concordance and to direct democracy, which may impede "great strides" but is also a safeguard against extremism, Switzerland's political life has remained stable even with the new "magic formula" for the Federal Council. "Step-by-step politics has its benefits as well as drawbacks," says political scientist Hanspeter Kriesi in an interview with the "Swiss Review" on the history and future of direct democracy (pages 18/19).

The two-page poster of the Einsiedeln Christmas Market (pages 12/13) may make some readers homesick. In Germany, homesickness was long regarded as the "Swiss disease", and not just since Johanna Spyri had her Heidi in Frankfurt long for home so severely that the

doctor ordered the only effective medicine: back to the Alps. As letters to the government of the city of Lucerne show, Swiss mercenaries were suffering from homesickness as far back as 300 years ago. Up to 100 years ago, homesickness was regarded as a life-threatening ailment, and because it mainly affected Swiss students and mercenaries, it was dubbed the "Swiss disease". In 1909 philosopher Karl Jaspers, in his dissertation "Homesickness and Crime", documented cases of domestic servants who killed the child under their care in order to be sent back home. The explanation for homesickness given by scientists in the 18th century is also remarkable: They believed the sickness was caused by the dense air in the lowlands, which people from mountain regions found difficult to cope with. In the 20th century, however, the realisation spread that homesickness was a perfectly normal, harmless condition rather than an illness. And in a way, since homesickness is always accompanied by lots of fond memories, it can actually be very beneficial.

Heinz Eckert



HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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■ **EDITORSHIP:** Heinz Eckert (EC), Editor-in-Chief; Rolf Ribi (RR), Alain Wey (AW), Gabriela Brodbeck (BDK), responsible for DFA Information Pages, Service for the Swiss Abroad DFA, CH-3003 Berne. René Lenzin (RL), reporting from parliament. Translation: CLS Communication Ltd ■ **POSTAL ADDRESS:** Publisher, Editorial Office, Advertising: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3000 Berne 6, Tel. +41 31 356 61 10, Fax +41 31 356 61 01, Postal Account (Swiss National Giro) 30-6768-9. Internet: www.revue.ch ■ **E-MAIL:** revue@aso.ch

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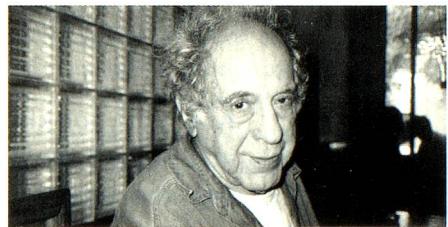
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Christmas market in the covered market, Montreux