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Faces, issues and Sunday newspapers

IT'S STRANGE: as early as last autumn – one year before the general election – you could be forgiven for thinking that the Swiss people will be electing a new government on 21 October 2007. And yet the vote is to select 246 parliamentarians, who then have to choose the seven members of the national government. For months now, media attention has focussed on the question of which of the current federal councillors will stand for another term in office, or rather, who will step aside or not even be up for re-election.

Sunday newspapers are the best platform on which to voice all such speculations. That's why parties and elected politicians so readily make use of this instrument. Anyone who can present himself cleverly in the Sunday press is guaranteed to be the talk of the town that very day in the electronic media. That leads to further reports and comments in the Monday papers, which are then discussed on the radio and on television. Party leaders who give an interview in a Sunday paper can rest assured that they will attract a very wide audience. Many long-standing observers of the day-to-day political workings in Switzerland see the spread of the Sunday press and the growing personalisation of domestic politics as a sign of a change of style in political dialogue that has little if anything in common with the rules of direct democracy.

Of course, most of the speculation in the media in recent months has been about Christoph Blocher; by far the most popular – and disputed – federal councillor. His media presence is huge and will probably increase further as the elections draw near. The Social Democrats and Greens have already said that they will not back him. But it is highly unlikely that the FDP and CVP will dare vote against Blocher because the SVP has threatened to withdraw from the Federal Council altogether and go into complete opposition if Blocher is deselected. And no-one really seems to like that idea. Nobody is prepared to wantonly jeopardize the well-oiled balance of power, and voting out the most popular federal councillor of all people could prove suicidal.

Another new feature is that – fully one year ahead of the election – federal councillors are already talking in public about their future in the Federal Council.

Headshot of Heinz Eckert

Political scientist Leonhard Neidhard calls it “the party-politicisation of the Federal Council”. Whereas in the past federal councillors only ever spoke to the media about themselves when announcing their resignation, Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger told journalists in November last year about his intention to remain in office and at the same ministry far beyond 2007. Federal Councillor Pascal Couchebin has also already stated for the record that he very much enjoys working in government and feels not the least bit worn out. However, it is more than doubtful whether the SP and FDP share the opinions of their two federal councillors.

“Personalities rather than programmes” was the headline of a recent leader in the NZZ newspaper. It is to be expected that the integration of foreigners will become an issue on the domestic political front. The rape of an underage girl in Zurich by fellow pupils of foreign origin triggered widespread outrage and hyped up the political atmosphere. Shrinking up the welfare state looks another likely election issue. The SP also wants to campaign on the question of Europe.

With so much political dynamite around, it is unlikely that the months leading up to the general election will be boring.

We'll keep you posted.

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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