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Inhaltsverzeichnis

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Stable Swiss democracy

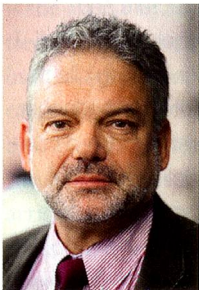
NOBODY SERIOUSLY THOUGHT THAT CHRISTOPH BLOCHER would be voted off the Federal Council. So it was all the more astonishing when it actually happened and Blocher's seat went to Grisons finance chief Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf. While the left of the council celebrated after the votes were counted, there was consternation and disappointment on the right.

While it was an open secret that the Minister for Justice would not get the votes of the Social Democrats, the Greens or many members of the Christian Democrats in his re-election attempt, the fact that Blocher did not get the backing he needed from the Liberal Democrats to secure his re-election was completely unexpected.

Most political commentators agreed that Christoph Blocher was not voted out for the way he ran his department. On the contrary, he was widely credited for the efficient and cost-conscious management of the Department of Justice. Nor was his political stance likely to have been the reason why many Liberal Democrats wanted him off the Federal Council. His sometimes uncouth manner and high-handed attitude would seem to explain his political demise. Such a domineering, omnipresent member of the Federal Council, who was unsuited to our country's collegial system of government, was no longer acceptable to many centre-right politicians.

In his departing speech to parliament, Christoph Blocher apologised for his frequent verbal attacks and asked for forgiveness from anyone he may have offended in the last four years.

The role the SVP will take up on the opposition benches will not become clear until the next parliamentary session. We will also soon find out how SVP Federal Councillors Samuel Schmid and Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf – who are not being supported by their party – will operate in a party-political vacuum. Christoph Blocher – the SVP's



Heinz Eckert

Vice-Chairman and financial backer – will become the party's head of research, strategy and campaign management. The 68-year-old will therefore continue to play an important role in Swiss politics.

Rolf Ribi's article on Swiss development cooperation starts with a quotation by Christoph Blocher, who repeatedly questioned its benefits. Blocher was vehement in his criticism of the CHF 400 million in aid sent to Africa each year.

The fact is that Switzerland is contributing increasingly less funds to development work, as the statistics show. In 2006, Swiss development aid amounted to 0.46% of GDP. Among the twenty-two OECD donor countries, Switzerland's contribution to aid ranks eleventh, well below the 0.7% proposed by the UN.

The ousting of Christoph Blocher from the Federal Council is unlikely by itself to result in an increase in Switzerland's contribution. All that will happen is that discussions will be somewhat calmer and the issue will cause more argument than controversy.

Otherwise everything will remain as it always has been. Why? Because Swiss democracy is inherently stable.

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Ex-Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher in his new/old function. By cartoonist Peter Schrank in the Basler Zeitung.

5
Mailbag

5
Books: Max Daetwyler – Apostle of Peace

7
Images: William Tell, a star of advertising

8
Switzerland is providing less and less development aid

Regional news

11
How Federal Councillor Blocher was voted out

12
Notes from Parliament

14
Interview: Christophe Keckeis, the Swiss army's commander-in-chief, takes stock

16
OSA news

18
A profile: Diego Mathier, Winemaker of the Year for 2007

19
News in brief

Cover: Water is a coveted asset in Nepal, too.
Photo: Helvetas

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