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Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf replaces Christoph Blocher

Parliament ousted Justice Minister Christoph Blocher after four years in office, electing Grisons finance director Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf to take his place in the national government. Despite having two federal councillors, the SVP feels it is no longer represented in the government and has gone into opposition. By René Lenzin

The Federal Council elections produced quite a turn-up. Although the Swiss People's Party (SVP) strengthened its position in the National Council elections basing its campaign around Christoph Blocher, the party's leading light lost his seat on the Federal Council after just one term in office. He was defeated by a narrow majority by Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, who accepted the position after brief consideration. The shock result was brought about by the Social Democrats, the Greens, most of the Christian Democrats (CVP) and some Liberal Democrats. Widmer-Schlumpf won 125 votes from this coalition, while Blocher could only secure 115. This was reminiscent of the events of 2003, when Blocher forced Ruth Metzler of the CVP out of office.

Blocher said he felt both disappointed and relieved after the results were announced. He claimed that while the defeat hurt, it meant he would once more enjoy more political freedom and be able to express his opinion without taking into account decisions he did not support but had to accept as part of the government. In the run-up to the election, the SVP declared that it would go into opposition if Blocher was voted out. The party stuck by its pledge, withdrawing support for SVP Federal Councillors Samuel Schmid and Widmer-Schlumpf and announcing that it would fight unacceptable decisions of the government and parliament with even greater conviction than before.

What this opposition policy will look like, and just how uncompromising the SVP's stance will be, was still unclear on going to press. However, details have emerged about Blocher's future role in politics. He confirmed that he would remain in politics immediately after the election results were announced. As the SVP's Vice-Chairman and financial backer, he now plans to oversee the party's strategy and de-

velopment. He will refrain from returning to the National Council for the time being. An immediate return would only be possible if one of Blocher's fellow party members volunteered to step down and all un-elected candidates on the SVP list of the canton concerned passed up a promotion opportunity.

DAUGHTER OF A FEDERAL COUNCILLOR AND A DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

While Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf was not a member of parliament before her election to the Federal Council, she was nevertheless a familiar figure in Bern. In 1998 she became the first woman to be elected to the Grisons cantonal government where she took over the department of finance. She achieved national recognition as head of all cantonal finance directors. She was also the driving force behind Switzerland's first cantonal referendum and successfully fought the federal government's tax-reduction proposals, which were rejected by voters in May 2004.

Widmer-Schlumpf fought for women's rights and was considered a role model for how a woman could reconcile family life with a career. Although her political roots were with the socialist-liberal Grisons democrats, her politics represent solid middle-class values. She put the canton's finances back on an even keel and succeeded in reducing Grisons' structural

weaknesses and cutting taxes. The new Federal Councillor is a dyed-in-the-wool federalist. She is said to be very affable, but also someone who drives a hard bargain.

The Doctor of Law, who will be 52 on 16 March, is married with three grown-up children. The life of a Federal Councillor is nothing new to her. Her fa-

ther, Leon Schlumpf, was part of the national government as Transport and Energy Minister from 1979 to 1987. On 1 January, his daughter succeeded Christoph Blocher as head of the Department of Justice and Police.

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Pascal Couchepin has been appointed Swiss President

All of the other six Federal Councillors were re-elected. In order of years in office, they are: Moritz Leuenberger (SP), Pascal Couchepin (FDP), Samuel Schmid (SVP), Micheline Calmy-Rey (SP), Hans-Rudolf Merz (FDP) and Doris Leuthard (CVP). Parliament appointed Valais-born Couchepin as President of Switzerland for the second time since 2003. Merz becomes Vice-President in place of Blocher, who was in line to take up the rotational position. Former Vice-Chancellor Corina Casanova (CVP) is the new Federal Chancellor and therefore the government's chief-of-staff. She was elected by parliament to succeed Annemarie Huber-Hotz (FDP), who had held the office since 2000.