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Pascale Bruderer Wyss – bridging the generation gap

As a child, Pascale Bruderer wanted to become an astronaut and the first woman to fly to Mars. She also quite fancied the idea of becoming a professional sportswoman. As the youngest ever President of the National Council and the most senior woman in Swiss politics, the 32-year-old does not regret having failed to fulfil her childhood dreams. She is very content in high office, and she could yet be the first woman to land on Mars!

Arranging an interview with Pascale Bruderer within a reasonable period of time is quite a challenge. It is not that she is averse to the media or interviews. On the contrary, she is well aware of the important role public relations play in politics. And the charming President of the National Council knows exactly how to deal with the media. She is an outstanding communicator. "There are certain things that are off limits", Pascale Bruderer is keen to stress. "I don't discuss my home life. That does not belong in the public domain. It wouldn't be fair to my husband." She knows that media attention has benefitted her enormously. She is young, attractive and a good orator. She has always been a media darling. She reveals: "The media honed in on the superlative 'youngest'. I have tried to use these opportunities to highlight issues which would otherwise receive little attention – such as social integration of the disabled." She explains that politicians need opportunities to present their ideas and to convey them to the people, but having personal contact with the people is still the most important thing. She believes excessive media attention should be avoided and does not think it necessary to accept every invitation.

A life after politics

Before we met for the interview in her panelled, silk-wallpapered office in the Federal Palace, she attended a meeting where a new Internet platform aimed at bridging the gap between the generations was presented on her own initiative. Addressing the meeting in French and German, she immediately won over the participants. At the social gathering organised afterwards by the President of the National Council in the Federal Palace, there was much speculation about whether Pascale Bruderer was soon set to become a Federal Councillor. But she waves this question away, saying she is not even thinking about it. Having entered politics as young as she did, she knows there is also life after politics.

In future, she could imagine dedicating herself entirely to her family or a professional career. She also knows just how much sacrifice is required to serve on the Federal Council. She reflects: "The world outside of politics, not least my private life, is also very important to me. I don't think I'd be prepared to give that up completely."

Pascale Bruderer's political career began very early. She was a municipal councillor in Baden while still at secondary school. She was elected to the Grand Council of the canton of Aargau at 24 years of age and to the National Council a few months later, always as the youngest member. She has nevertheless always attached great importance to having career options. She is also part-time director (60% of working time) of the Cancer League of the canton of Aargau, an office which she is currently unable to execute to her usual extent. As the most senior woman in Swiss politics, she has virtually been a professional politician for a year. She does not work in Berne every day, but she is always on the go. Pascale Bruderer explains: "Throughout the whole of Switzerland actually, which I really enjoy." She believes a key part of the parliamentary president's role is to promote Parliament to the people and to foster contact with them. She constantly emphasises how important it is for politicians to keep their feet on the ground and not to lose touch with everyday life or the people.

Pascale Bruderer entered politics at secondary school as a member of the pupils' council. In this role, she realised that she could make things happen. She wanted to do the same outside school. She was not influenced by her family politically. So she scrutinised the parties closely and soon saw that the Social Democrats (SP) best represented her beliefs – justice and equal opportunities for everyone. The Social Democrats focus most rigorously on these objectives in their political work, she says. Her family is partly responsible for her vehement commitment to solidarity and social cohesion. Her parents

would constantly remind their three daughters that all people deserve equal rights and opportunities.

Unplanned career

If her parents were asked today whether they were proud of the fact that their youngest daughter had been elected to the highest position held by a woman in Switzerland, they would still say that they were proud of all three of their daughters. The fact that her mother has two brothers who are deaf has also had an impact on her. Deafness hinders communication, and to understand and be understood are an important part of everyday life, not to mention political life. She has good relations with other political camps beyond party lines. This also explains why she was elected Switzerland's most senior female politician by one of the most impressive margins ever. She has learned sign language because of her two uncles. She is proud that the news on SFinfo is translated into sign language for the deaf on her own initiative.

She never planned to have a political career. Having entered politics as young as she did, she did not have her sights set on high office, but was instead pursuing more substantive objectives. It all just happened, explains Pascale Bruderer. She believes the political climate in Switzerland is a healthy one. It could be more respectable and focus on more relevant issues than at present, but overall she believes it is much more constructive than in other countries. She is an ardent supporter of political concordance and direct democracy, which is why she values Switzerland's political system so highly.

She is delighted that there are now more young politicians in Parliament than when she entered the National Council eight years ago. She says: "Back then, only Ursula Wyss, Toni Brunner and I were in the 'under-35s'. Today, it has become quite a big group." However, Pascale Bruderer does not believe that young people necessarily adopt a different political approach on issues to older people.



PASCALE BRUDERER WYSS

32-year-old Pascale Bruderer grew up in Baden with two elder sisters in a family interested but not actively involved in politics.

Her political career began as a 20-year-old secondary school student on the municipal council in Baden. In 2001, she was elected to the Grand Council in

Aargau and, in 2002, stepped up to the National Council. She studied political science, constitutional law and economic history and is the director of the

Cancer League of the canton of Aargau. She married last year and lives with her husband and Kala, her Labrador, in Nussbaumen near Baden.

ple. But they are less blinkered in their personal dealings with one another. She says that young people develop the best contacts beyond party lines, which is extremely beneficial and contributes greatly to a positive environment.

Pascale Bruderer is the perfect embodiment of the new generation of politicians. She thinks independently, does not just operate within rigid party lines and voices her own opinion. She did not really have any particular idols in politics, but she holds Helmut Hubacher in high regard and enjoys reading his writings. She also admires Ruth Dreifuss as she has never lost her human warmth in the brutal world of politics. The relationship between the generations has become a key issue in her year as President partly because she has learned and benefited so much from older people and realised at an early age how

important it is to have ties, cooperation and an exchange of views between the generations. This is a key part of the glue that holds society together. Pascale Bruderer says we can never do too much in this respect. This is why she is participating in no fewer than twenty events concerning this issue alone in her year as President. Is her diary already full until the end of the year? "Even beyond that", she replies with an infectious smile.

Communication as a strength

Official visits abroad are also on the agenda. In the autumn, she will probably visit the Nepalese parliament, which is currently in the process of establishing a system of government and would like to learn about Switzerland's federal approach. She will not have much time for her private life this year. However, she makes time every day to take her

Labrador, Kala, for a walk and enjoys hiking and socialising with friends and family when she gets the chance. She also hopes her year as President will not mean missing out on too many cultural events. She excitedly recalls a wonderful evening recently spent watching the operetta "The Gypsy Baron" in Beinwil. She says it was fantastic to see practically a whole village support a cultural event of this kind that around 200 people have spent months working on.

Her genuine enthusiasm is also infectious, which clearly stands her in good stead in politics. She sees communication, which also involves listening, as one of her strengths. And what is her biggest weakness? She does not hesitate for a second before replying: "That is undoubtedly my impatience."