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“Switzerland is not governed badly”

Does Switzerland need government reform, more Federal Councillors and a two-year term of office for the position of Swiss President? Is our political system outdated, cumbersome and no longer fit-for-purpose? Heinz Eckert interviews Zurich-based political scientist and professor emeritus, Leonhard Neidhart.

“SWISS REVIEW”: *The German current affairs magazine “Der Spiegel” recently reported that Switzerland has a unique system of government. Is that the case?*

PROFESSOR LEONHARD NEIDHART: Every nation’s system of government has its own unique characteristics. Two fundamental distinctive features are particular to Switzerland – firstly, federal government combines three different principles of political/governmental organisation, namely federalism, representation and direct democracy. This means that Switzerland, a small nation, actually has an organisationally “large” and complex system of government. The second aspect specific to Switzerland is the fact that it is governed politically by a collective body, by Councillors, and not by an individual leader, such as a president or chancellor.

Is it true that direct democracy is more cumbersome than less democratic systems of government?

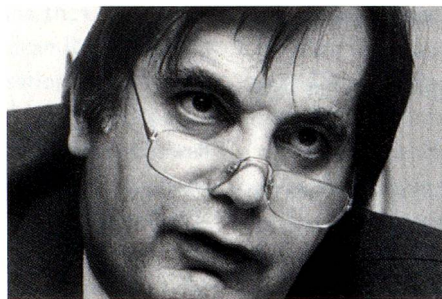
A system where important decisions are made by the entire electorate is clearly more complex than if policy is determined by a parliamentary majority and a leadership in the form of heads of state or coalition committees. But, it’s about the effect on policy-making.

However, the term “reform backlog” originated in Germany and refers to political life in Germany.

“Reform backlog” is a buzzword that does not really mean much. In Switzerland, with its system of federalism and direct democracy, reform is often a slower process, as shown, for example, by the late introduction of the vote for women and accession to the UN. However, this does not mean that Switzerland is more modern than Germany, for example, in various cantons and also at federal level.

The Federal Council has been under constant criticism recently. Has this been justified?

Actually, individual members of the Federal Council, specific Federal Council resolutions and its organisational structure have



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come in for repeated criticism recently. We must therefore differentiate. The Federal Council as an institution has continually been criticised over its electoral system, number of members and composition ever since the foundation of the federal state in 1848. However, this system of a collective exercise of power has remained extremely stable and also legitimate. Despite its small number, it has proven flexible and adaptable with regard to the integration of the linguistic regions, the parties and also the sexes. This is why people talk about the “magic formula”. The Federal Council is the cornerstone of Switzerland, a multilingual nation governed by the will of the people. It is one of the country’s special characteristics. The fact that the Federal Council cannot work miracles and that its resolutions can and should be criticised is perfectly normal. We have a problem with the collegial system. Collegiality means that responsibility and accountability for success and failure should be borne jointly. However, collegiality does not mean that there cannot be differences of opinion on the Federal Council. This is inevitable as politics is a conflict-ridden, complex business. Neither should Federal Council members be expected to always put on a perfect display of collegiality in public. If you look at the rows in German coalition governments, our conduct is

still very collegial by comparison. We should not idealise collegiality. The Federal Council is not a monastery.

The Federal Council has been under constant scrutiny since the election and de-selection of Christoph Blocher. Was the biggest error his election or his de-selection?

There has never been a “perfect” Federal Council election and there has always been conflict between the “alpha political figures”. Parliament has the right to elect, de-select or not elect any person it chooses. Blocher’s de-selection is explicable and had its reasons, but I don’t want to judge.

The principle of collegiality, above all, often no longer seems to work. How important is this to the work of the Federal Council?

As federal government and therefore the Federal Council has an increasing number of ever more extensive and complex tasks to carry out, and the departments and main federal offices have become more and more influential, collective government has certainly become more difficult. However, Switzerland must live with this because it does not want a senior leadership figure.

Did things once run more smoothly in Berne?

When looking at the Federal Council’s past we have to distinguish between specific periods. The National Council was elected based on a majority system from 1848 to 1918, which produced a politically homogeneous Federal Council. This was overburdened from the start because it only had a very small administration behind it. As a result, there was constant talk of reform, which is explained in my book on the early parliament. Governments everywhere became more powerful at times of war and crisis, including the Federal Council. Federal Council proportional representation, the magic formula, was introduced in the 1950s after the Second World War as a late consequence of National Council proportional representation. Neither individual members nor the Federal Council as a whole have since committed major errors of judgement, transgressions or blunders, which has meant that, almost without exception, no member has been de-selected or had to resign. That is also a characteristic specific to Switzerland – it is a politically settled nation. Switzerland’s political performance shows that it has not been governed badly.

Does the Federal Council perhaps work better together and in a more collegial manner than is continually suggested in the media?

The press used to aim severe criticism primarily at the Federal Assembly.

With television, personalisation and the importance of viewing figures, a whole new aspect has entered politics. Just think about Obama in the USA, Berlusconi in Italy and Guttenberg in Germany, all of whom have generated massive media hype. This shift towards personalisation and media attention is a double-edged sword for our collective government. On the one hand, television brings the politicians closer to the people but, on the other, it does so very selectively, which can completely disrupt the collegial system.

How important actually is the allocation of the departments? Shouldn't a good Federal Councillor be able to run any department?

The allocation of departments is a key aspect of collective government and one which causes conflict. That is why the founders of the constitution left it to the Federal Council itself. It has become increasingly difficult in light of growing disparity between the departments. Of course, a lawyer is required for the justice department. In this respect, the most recent solution is not ideal. But if you consider how many players (two chambers, the people, the cantons, the associations, the major parties and a large coalition) determine Swiss politics, this puts the importance of the distribution of the departments into perspective. Majority support and consensus must be achieved for all major issues.

The Federal Councillors are always referred to as ministers and portrayed in the media as though they can make decisions themselves and power does not lie with Parliament and ultimately with the people. Do we need better education about politics?

In principle, it can be said that if the people want to have a say through direct democracy they also need to have knowledge. But the referendum are also a form of applied or practical education in citizenship. This education needs to be provided in the schools. General study courses have all but disappeared in the universities, which are now dominated by specialisation. This means people can know a great deal about one very specific area and highly qualified engineers or doctors, for example, do not have to know a thing about politics. Pressure on performance is also squeez-

ing general studies out in the grammar schools. Society only has itself to blame if people are then taken in by populists.

People are always saying that our system of government dates back to 1848 and no longer meets modern requirements. Do you share this view?

Some parts of our system of government, as in all historical democracies (USA, UK), are of course outdated. That is an element of traditional legitimacy, which a nation governed by the will of the people needs. On the other hand, Switzerland is also highly modern with its decentralisation and direct democracy. With its three organisational principles, Switzerland has a highly complex political system that can successfully overcome new challenges, such as environmental issues.

How much distance should there be between Federal Council members and their party?

The dual loyalty required of our Federal Councillors is one of the unique characteristics of our system of government. The Federal Council must display a high degree of impartiality because we have no head of state and since it represents the political will of the nation. Members must therefore show loyalty to this body. At the same time, Federal Councillors also represent their parties, national regions and gender to which they are also bound to ensure power is exercised collectively. Switzerland depends heavily on Federal Councillors displaying dual loyalty transparently and appropriately.

Federal Councillors travel much more often these days than in the past. Is this a necessity in a globalised world?

Switzerland has always had a frugal approach to financing politics, which is why there was opposition to allowing Federal Councillors to travel. Another case in point is that, before 1900, no shorthand reports were made of parliamentary meetings owing to the cost. Switzerland is now interlinked with and dependent on the European community and economy like no other European country, yet battles against it. So, our members of government need to have intensive contact with their counterparts abroad and need to travel.

Does the Federal Council need to be expanded? Should departments be organised and allocated differently?

This issue has been the subject of relentless debate since 1848. There are arguments

for and against. I tend towards the arguments against. Our Federal Council is a collective body of equals who must share responsibility for policy. If this principle is to take priority then this Council must be small in number. A membership of seven is practically ideal. The larger the Federal Council, the more factions are likely to be formed internally, making collegiality impossible. In any case, nine Federal Councillors would not resolve the problems of excessive workload and management. Making the Federal Council larger creates more problems than it resolves. However, the departments do need to be reorganised. The Federal Council cannot achieve this itself and Parliament probably can't do it. This is indeed a problem.

What is your view on a two-year term of office for the Swiss President? Is that in keeping with our system of government?

I believe that the collective exercise of power should be based on the original Swiss notion of rotation of leadership positions, which is why the Federal Council should also be maintained. If we had a mediocre Swiss President, he or she would remain in office for two years if we changed the system. Under the current system, they would remain in office for just one year. Leadership problems have to be resolved in a different way. The longer someone remains in charge, the greater the potential for conflict. It's therefore a case of the better the devil you know.

Will the Federal Council ever be elected by the people?

The election of the Federal Council by the people is a big issue. I don't think there is majority support for it, especially not from the cantons. The French-speaking and smaller cantons would reject it. There are more reasons against than for the election of the Federal Council by the people.

What are the reasons against it?

The direct election of the Federal Council would centralise and personalise the entire political system to a great extent and create even more disputes in direct democracy, which is already laden with conflict. An already powerful government would also be made even stronger at the expense of the part-time Parliament. Parliament would face an even sterner task in controlling the administration.