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New prospects

POLITICAL COMMENTATORS and analysts believe that 2011 is set to be a momentous election year for Switzerland, which may even result in far-reaching changes to the political system. The party landscape has changed enormously over the past four years. You can read about how this situation has arisen and who the new and main protagonists are from page 8 onwards.

The Swiss media all agree that Parliament and, even more so, the Federal Council have failed to make a good impression over recent years. Mistrust, animosity and antagonism have dominated politics for long periods. Is this really the kind of government the people have wanted? Of course not. This inevitably raises the question of whether the problem lies with the present incumbents – would an influx of fresh faces make everything better? Or do we perhaps need a new system?

Is the system of political concordance with all the major parties in government, which has been in place since 1959, perhaps outdated? Does this system no longer meet the requirements of modern times? That may well be the case. The issue is certain to be the subject of heated debate this year. In the past, political parties have on several occasions threatened to leave the government and go into opposition, and the Social Democrats (SP) now suspect others of plotting to throw them out of government as well.

That would result in a system with a coalition government and an opposition – a system that is commonplace outside Switzerland. But is that desirable? The immediate response would be “no”, as it would obstruct our unique, highly sophisticated system of direct democracy with its power of referenda for parties and interest groups, with federalism and cantonal majority. Such an idea is bound to provoke fear and a defensive reaction. However, it is also evident that under a system of coalition government and opposition it would be much clearer who bears responsibility for what. It would prevent



Barbara Engel

parties from participating in government while behaving like the opposition – an approach successfully adopted by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) for many years.

Realistically, the chances of a change of system at the grand finale to the election year – the complete re-election of the Federal Council on 14 December – are slim. This would require the middle-ground parties, the FDP and CVP, to opt for the centre-right with the SVP or the centre-left with the SP. The FDP and CVP are unlikely to risk making such a move as both lack strong leaders.

Incidentally, “direct democracy in an international context” will be the main theme of the Congress of the Swiss Abroad in Lugano in August.

And now to matters concerning our magazine. My predecessor, Heinz Eckert, announced in the last edition of “Swiss Review” that I would be taking up the position of Editor-in-Chief at the beginning of the year. To produce a good magazine, we, as the editorial staff, are reliant on interaction with our readers. We cannot always know at our offices in Switzerland which issues matter to the Swiss abroad in Berlin, Ouagadougou, Shanghai or New York. I therefore welcome your suggestions, feedback and criticism, and hope this results in a fruitful exchange.

BARBARA ENGEL

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Cover photo: The official photograph of the new Federal Council. More on the photo and on the goals and policies of the Swiss government on pages 8 to 11 and 18 (Photo: donated)

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