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Farewell to part-time politics

The notion of serving on a part-time basis is deeply embedded in Swiss politics. The defining image of politicians is one of men and women who volunteer for public service alongside their regular jobs. However, part-time politicians have become rare beasts, particularly at national level. Numbers are even declining in the communes, where a close relationship with citizens is imperative. Switzerland's part-time democracy is on the point of being consigned to the history books. By Marc Lettau

With national elections looming, politicians from all sides are omnipresent as they vie for Switzerland's highest legislative positions. The basic picture people have of the typically Swiss system of democracy is probably along these lines: the rifle club's trophies are at the back of the hall in a glass cabinet, the communal council are discussing matters at the front of the room and the 50 or so citizens attending the communal assembly are listening attentively. They nod the items on the agenda through, approving them all, though not without asking a few critical questions here and there. The reorganisation of the school system is applauded, the dog licence fee is increased, investment in snow clearance is agreed, 10,000 Swiss francs are to be contributed to the renovation of the football club's café as the club is the "village's most important social institution", and the solidarity contribution to the cantonal capital's cultural institutions is grudgingly approved.

Part-time politics in the communes

The communal council at the front of the hall is relieved to receive the approval of "the people". However, it is also a part of "the people" itself. None of the members of the communal government is a trained political leader. All have very different professions, and they give up their free time to hold political positions and sacrifice their evenings to perform political duties away from the spotlight. The financial reimbursement is generally modest. At the end of a term in office, there is at most a good bottle of red wine and a bouquet of

flowers for partners neglected because of politics.

Politicians are generally part-time in Switzerland's 2,800 or so communes where politics affects people's everyday lives most directly and contact with the state is closest. 94% of communal government members work on a purely part-time basis. They are politically responsible – essentially during their free time and evenings – for around a third of all state services provided in Switzerland. Four out of five communal presidents are also

"part-timers" – men and women whose experience comes from normal everyday professional and family life. Members of local government can only expect regular working hours and decent salaries in communes with

populations of at least 50,000. But the communes have fewer than 1,200 inhabitants on average, and the part-time system has a strong influence on how Swiss politics views itself. Part-time politicians are seen as being close to the people. They do not simply toe the party line, they are also mindful of achieving consensus.

One example: Walter Zürcher from Merlach

Walter Zürcher, mayor in the Fribourg commune of Merlach, just about fits the typical profile of a part-time Swiss politician. Zürcher has served on the communal government for 35 years. He explains that he wanted to have an influence over the place where he grew up. He entered politics as a young man despite never having joined a party. Zürcher, who is now of retirement age, does not see politics as a means of personal advancement. He reveals almost apologetically that he has never been drawn to "higher polit-

ical office", has never wanted to stand for the cantonal parliament and has never dreamt of becoming a National Councillor. He has instead focused on "remaining approachable and listening to and understanding the people". The mayor is delighted that communal assemblies in Merlach are attended by 20% of the citizens on average. That is a relatively high figure. He also sees the fact that people continue to discuss matters over wine and nibbles after the communal assemblies and that "these discussions often last longer than the entire meeting" as a sign of endorsement.

An oath in the summertime

Zürcher is similar to the type of "modern politician" envisaged by the founding fathers of modern-day Switzerland. The Swiss Constitution (1798) imposed de facto by France conclusively extended the part-time principle from compulsory military service to politics. The constitution stated that every citizen was obliged to perform military service as a "born soldier of the fatherland". Everyone of full age also had to take an oath to "serve the fatherland and to protect freedom and equality as a good and loyal citizen with great rigour and zeal and to espouse a legitimate abhorrence of self-indulgence" in the "summertime" in the presence "of parents and the authorities". Despite the brevity of the Helvetic Period, its impact on the structure of modern Switzerland is unmistakable. Giving individual citizens key positions in government for a specific term of office became common practice. This represented a rejection of a form of government where power was held by magistrates from a ruling class.

Losing its sheen

However, this part-time democracy is under great strain. Issues to be resolved at all

levels of state – communes, cantons and federal government – have become both more numerous and increasingly complex. Far-reaching global issues, such as the migration of refugees, climate change and energy policy in the post-Fukushima era, are having an impact right down to the lowest levels of government. At the same time, citizens have far greater expectations. People who are politicians “on the side” are often no longer able to meet them. The upshot is a constant transformation of the political landscape. Communes are being merged and becoming larger. They are also reducing the size of their governments. Both factors are resulting in more professional structures. The canton of Glarus provides the most striking example. Last year, it had 25 communes. Today, only three remain.

Reto Steiner, professor of business studies at the University of Berne, predicts that hundreds of communes will disappear over the next few years. Perhaps even the picturesque Ticino commune of Corippo will be unable to escape this trend in the long term. This village, situated on a mountain slope in the Verzasca Valley, is Switzerland’s small-

est commune with a population of 18, and every adult sits either on the communal council or on a committee. This is part-time democracy in its purest form.

Full-time politicians in Berne

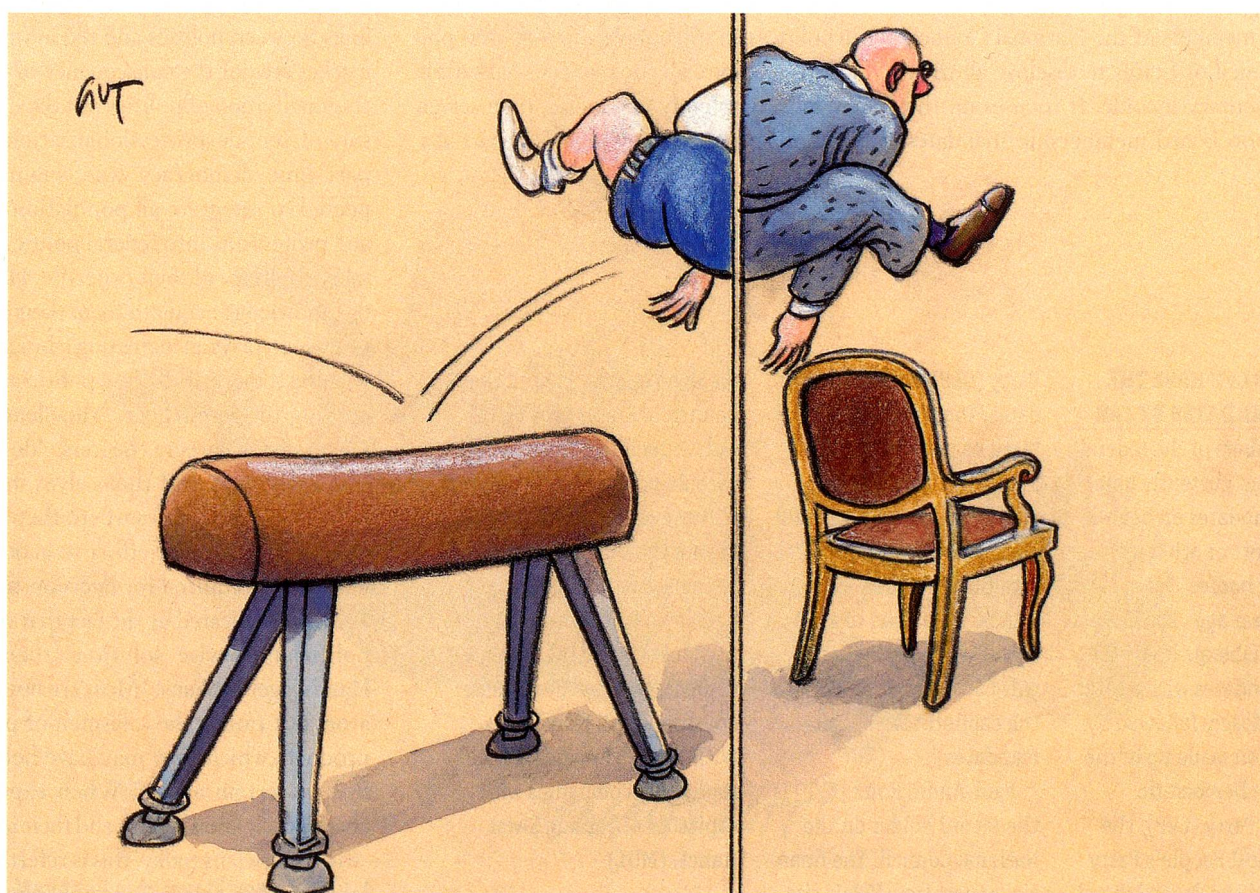
Part-time democracy has come under much greater pressure at cantonal and national level than in the communes. Recent studies confirm that while people frequently like to make reference to the part-time principle in politics, it is nevertheless losing its meaning. The “true part-time politician” has in fact become a rare beast in the federal capital. All the members of the smaller chamber, the Council of States, are professional politicians without exception. If they do hold a paid position in addition to their political mandate, this is generally directly related to it. The picture is similar in the larger chamber, the National Council. A study supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation last year showed that National Councillors spend 57%

of their working hours on their political mandate on average. This indicates that politics is also the main profession of National Councillors. The researchers said that the label of “part-time politician” was only in any way applicable to around 10% of all the members of the National Council.

Part-time democracy still serves as a moral compass under the cupola of the Federal Palace.

No part-timers – is that concerning?

No part-time politicians at all in the Council of States and only 10% in the National Council. Is that a worry? The fact that national politics is constantly moving away from the ideal of a part-time democracy is certainly causing concern and distrust, above all because of money. Since a political career in Berne is no longer a part-time pursuit but a highly demanding position that provides a livelihood, the amounts of money invested in electoral campaigns are increasing. Ambitious candidates have long been investing tens of thousands of francs in their personal campaigns, depending on the canton. Individual cantonal parties demand



contributions of up to 40,000 Swiss francs for a good position on the electoral list alone. Tim Frey, general secretary of the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP), told "Swiss Review" that anyone not investing at least 50,000 to 100,000 Swiss francs in their electoral campaign in the canton of Zurich "would be omitted from the list from the outset and not even used to make up the numbers". Political commentators estimate that 100 million Swiss francs will be spent in the run-up to this year's National Council and Council of States elections. In 2007, spending totalled around 50 million Swiss francs. This rapid increase is fuelling fears – or allegations, depending on your viewpoint – that politicians are becoming more and more dependent on economically powerful interest groups.

Initiative for greater transparency?

Part-time democracy still serves as a moral compass under the cupola of the Federal Palace. From time to time, parliament has itself applied restrictions and approved attempts to counter the corruptibility of politics. The transparency initiative for which signatures are currently being collected follows in the tradition of such corrective measures. This popular initiative, primarily launched by younger politicians, calls for members of the National Council and Council of States to disclose all their supplementary income. It focuses on the over 2,000 board membership mandates

held by federal parliamentarians. Lukas Reimann, a 29-year-old National Councillor for the Swiss People's Party (SVP) from St. Gallen, who is the driving force behind the initiative, told "Swiss Review" that a response to the "glut of mandates" was urgently required. He said: "Too many parliamentarians focus on the interests of their financial patrons rather than on those of the people and the nation." Pressure from lobbyists is growing, and they are becoming increasingly bold in their efforts. This is "logical to some degree" as "the more the state

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wants to regulate, the greater the lobbying efforts become", including those by the banking, healthcare, energy and telecommunications sectors. Does Reimann ultimately want to help save the part-time principle in politics through this initiative? Yes, to a certain extent, he explained. He does not see part-time politicians as a thing of the past, but instead as the "ideal". Anyone involved in politics can still uphold the part-time philosophy despite all the professionalisation "by not completely distancing themselves from the people and not becoming part of a

detached elite". Reimann believes the disclosure of supplementary income is an important, overdue corrective measure in this respect. He revealed: "The market for influence over national politics is now worth billions."

"De-professionalisation"

What is the viewpoint of a typical exponent of the market so severely criticised by Reimann? Kuno Hämisegger, an economist on the payroll of the Swiss Bankers Association and one of Switzerland's most high-profile lobbyists, concedes that Reimann is correct in one respect. The lobbying market in Switzerland is growing at an "explosive" pace. In addition to traditional lobbyists, there are now also a vast number of "strategic consultants". He says that this is "not a problem as long as it is clear who stands for what". Hämisegger is "completely opposed" to Reimann's solution as his initiative is based on a very demeaning, insulting picture of the corruptible politician. This perception is fundamentally inaccurate, he argues. It is only because of lobbyists that federal politicians are able to make independent and well-founded political decisions on highly complex issues.

Does this mean that federal politics could not function competently without lobbyists? Hämisegger says that the extensive links between politics and the information market are not the consequence of the professionalisation of politics but the direct result of its "de-professionalisation". The part-time democracy was originally expected to integrate all population groups and professions into federal politics and to take advantage of their expertise. However, the knowledge acquired from their original profession plays an increasingly insignificant role for today's "full-time politicians". According to Hämisegger, "they leave their professional careers, become 'de-professionalised' and find themselves in highly complex political roles where they have to go to a great deal of effort to acquire the knowledge required for decision-making". This is complicated by the fact that very few politicians devise solutions themselves. Hämisegger explains: "Most are not the creators but rather the salesmen of political products which they may have helped define in certain areas." When experts exchange their knowledge – and their interests – with politicians today, this is referred to as lobbying, but this is "certainly not the op-

FDP AND CVP HAVE THE MOST MANDATES BY FAR

The members of the federal parliament currently hold 2,045 mandates on boards of directors or other management bodies, 15% more than a year ago. The faction FDP.The Liberals holds the most mandates with a total of 583, closely followed by the faction made up of the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP), the Evangelical People's Party (EVP) and the Green Liberal

Party (GLP) with 565 mandates. Together, these two factions hold 56% of all mandates. Through these mandates, the FDP and CVP represent corporate capital totalling 11 billion Swiss francs. According to a study by the company Credita, this corresponds to 92% of the capitalisation of all mandates.

Paul-André Roux (CVP) is the record holder on the National Council. The financial expert from Valais sits

on 58 boards. The list in the Council of States tops Felix Gutzwiller (FDP) from Zurich with 24 mandates.

However, not all mandates are the same. According to the study, the federal politician who represents the most capital is Council of States member Jean-René Fournier (CVP) from Valais. With "just" 11 mandates, he represents companies with capital of 4.7 billion Swiss francs. (MUL)

posite of transparency". And the lobbyist concludes: "Part-time democracy is probably on the way to being consigned to history." But the "highly populist" transparency initiative does not protect one single noble ideal. If politicians are constantly obliged to perform a "striptease", "ordinary people" will be deterred from entering politics, leaving the field open to "freaks, populists and narcissists".

Is "younger" necessarily "better"?

Reimann, the youngest member of the National Council since his election, also advocates the election of more young politicians as a means of "combating back-scratching politics". In contrast to older politicians, those of the younger generation do not sit on boards of directors in their scores and tend to pursue their political ideals more. He also argues that the younger

generation is underrepresented. Is it the youngsters then who will help save some of the key principles of part-time politics in the modern age with their fresh and up-standing approach? National Councillor Evi Allemann (Social Democratic Party (SP), Berne), who was the youngest councillor until Reimann's election, has a different view. She says that the youngsters are not generally "part-timers" but instead dedicate themselves entirely to their political mandate. But Allemann does

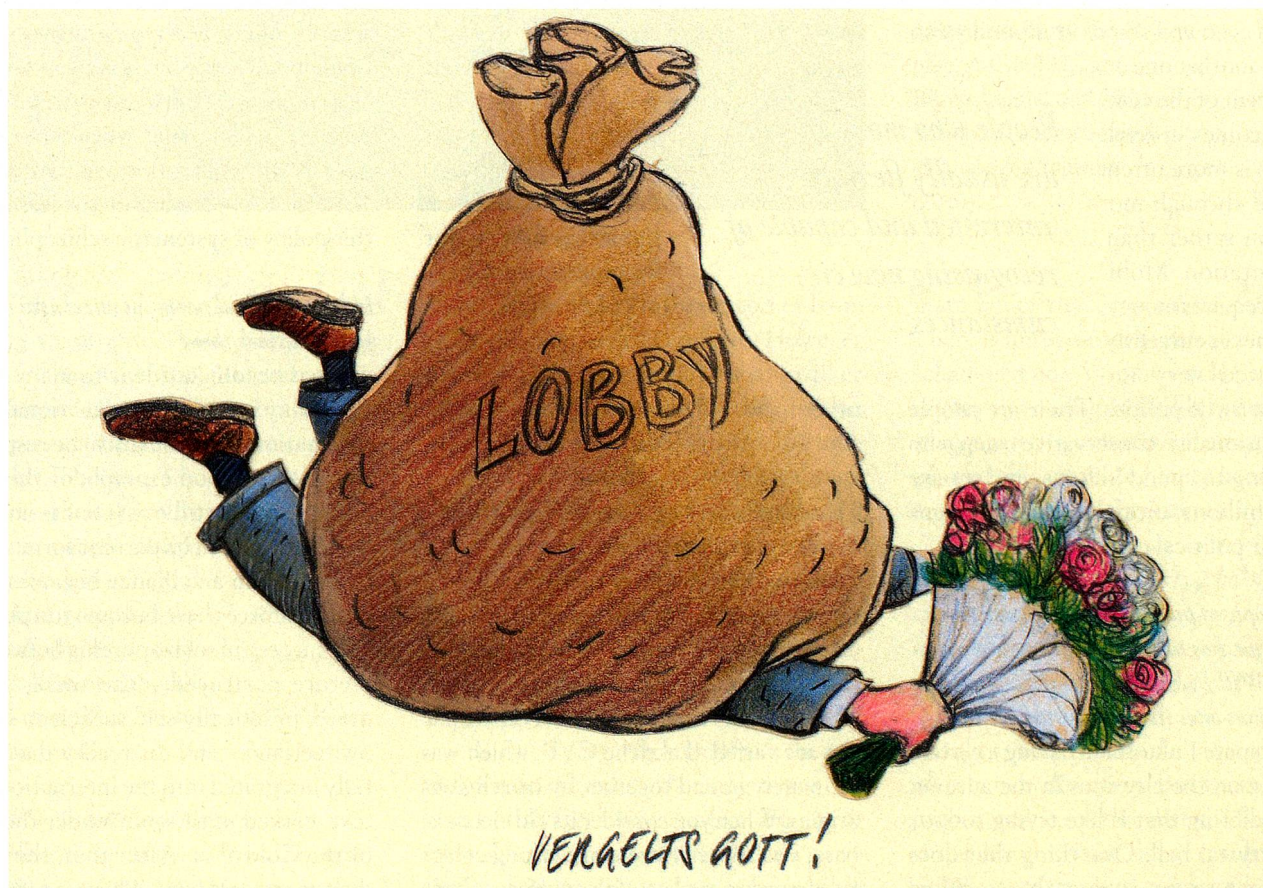
agree that younger politicians "tend to be more independent because they sit on fewer boards of directors". There are therefore fewer financial ties. However: "There is a disproportionately high number of young National Councillors who are not typical part-time politicians." Anyone who wants to be involved in national politics today has to organise their political work very profes-

sionally and has "no real time for a regular job that bears no relation to the mandate".

A multitude of part-timers?

Is part-time democracy just a myth? Will more rigorous transparency rules save some key aspects of part-time democracy? With regard to the debate on these issues, it should be pointed out that everyday life in Switzerland – outside the world of politics – is shaped by voluntary work like in no other country. In addition to those who dedicate their free time to politics, hundreds of thousands of people are committed to voluntary social work in associations. The number of such associations in Switzerland is unparalleled. While exact figures do not exist, there are well over 300,000. Around half of the resident population is involved in some kind of association. One in four people carries out voluntary work for an institution. Such a high number of associations and such extensive voluntary commitment are indicators of a society's great capacity for self-organisation and aptitude for part-time systems.

Too many parliamentarians focus on the interests of their financial patrons rather than on those of the people.



May the Lord reward you!