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The magic formula and the parties' conjuring trick

Georg Kohler, professor emeritus of political philosophy at the University of Zurich, is conducting observation and analysis of the election campaign in Switzerland throughout 2015 on behalf of the Swiss Abroad.

Switzerland is probably the only democracy in the world to have been governed for over half a century now by a large coalition, in fact a very large one. What is remarkable here is that power in Switzerland is not shared by just two parties but instead four (FDP, CVP, BGB or SVP and SP). At least this was the case until late autumn in 2007 and the great watershed moment when the Christoph Blocher affair, a revolutionary episode for the Swiss system, occurred.

You will recall how, after a four-year term on the Federal Council, the SVP leader, despite being the uncontested head of the strongest party in terms of share of the vote, was de-selected and replaced by his "party colleague" – I'm sorry, but that is simply the proper term – Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf. The vast majority of the SVP regarded this as an act of betrayal, and the new Federal Councillor paid for her deed with expulsion from the party.

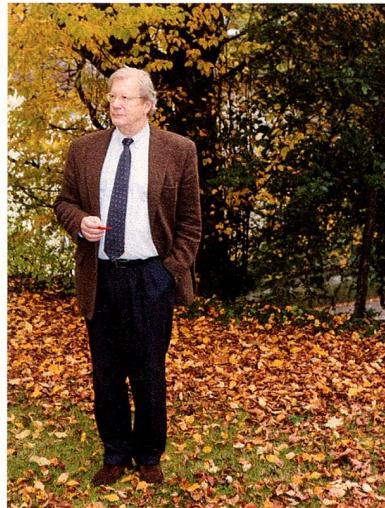
This resulted in two things – the foundation of another centre party, the Swiss Conservative Democratic Party (BDP), and the second SVP Federal Councillor, Samuel Schmid, also joining the BDP, which was essentially supported by the faction of the SVP who disagreed with Blocher's approach.

This shattered the "magic formula" that had existed since 1959 dividing the seven Federal Council seats amongst the four strongest parties. Based purely on share-of-the-vote calculations, the little BDP would never have obtained two Federal Council seats.

However, neither the conservative parties nor the SVP sought to make a big issue of it. The SVP simply wanted to return to government as soon as possible. It also achieved this aim quickly – admittedly only with the begrudging approval of Ms Widmer-Schlumpf's continued presence. In December 2008, the long-serving Party President Ueli Maurer was elected to the Federal Council as the successor to Samuel Schmid, who stepped down.

This meant that the "magic formula" has for the last seven years no longer just contained four parties but instead five. One certainly wonders how long that will continue.

The elections in the autumn are fascinating not least because of the "Widmer-Schlumpf" situation. If the SVP only makes slight headway compared with 2011, if the BDP



loses some ground, if the CVP relinquishes a few seats to its conservative rivals and the FDP gains support at the expense of the Green Liberals, then the outlook will not be good for the Finance Minister regardless of how well she has performed her duties. The SVP is of course thirsty for revenge without saying as much.

Widmer-Schlumpf has been blamed for the supposed shift to the left in Swiss government policy which is nevertheless characterised by the extremely restrained withdrawal from nuclear power primarily attributable to the conservative Doris Leuthard. Regardless, the de-selection of Widmer-Schlumpf is being portrayed as the key strategic step required to correct a misguided path. A dyed-in-the-wool SVP President would clearly want to ensure that a more restrictive approach is adopted to asylum and immigration policy.

It is already clear the SVP is holding a strong hand to exert pressure on the FDP and CVP if the outcome outlined materialises. Both parties want to keep their existing representatives on the Federal Council and with a bit of guile the claims of both could be played off against one another splendidly.

The point I am making is that for once the electorate will be able to determine the winners and losers of a Swiss parliamentary election based on the leadership figures. This is rare in Switzerland and an indication of the fact that the style of politics has also changed here, shifting from an issues-oriented search for consensus by politicians to a no-holds-barred battle over the make-up of the governing body.

Expressing it so pithily is nonetheless overstating matters. The nation's institutions still exert sufficient pressure to ensure objective, matter-of-fact cooperation. The seven-member Federal Council is and remains a collective authority which only performs effectively if its members produce reasonable policies essentially deemed acceptable by the overwhelming majority. The departure or arrival of individual figures cannot do much to change that.

This will be welcomed by political philosophers and provides good reason to laud the constitution governing Switzerland's authorities. *Rule of law, not rule of men* is after all the most important element in all good state systems, including our own based on (direct) democracy.

