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Successful in business, cautious in politics – Johann Schneider-Ammann, President of the Swiss Confederation

Johann Schneider-Ammann's transformation from business leader to politician is still not complete after five years on the Federal Council. Perhaps that is why he is the right president for this year.

CHRISTOPH LENZ

The Federal Council faces an incredibly challenging year. A key referendum on Europe and the bilateral approach could be held at the end of 2016. In parallel, two extensive reform projects, one aimed at shoring up the old-age pension system and the other regarding Switzerland as a tax location, are going through Parliament. Both raise contentious issues over equitable distribution, and failure is unthinkable in each case. Then there is the fragile state of the economy.

The fact that Johann Schneider-Ammann has taken up the office of president at this very moment has not been greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm in all quarters. There is nevertheless good reason to suggest the minister of economic affairs is the right man at the right moment.

There are clearly much more accomplished communicators in the Federal Council. Appearances by Johann Schneider-Ammann are a godsend for Swiss satirists. Just as jokes were once told about Federal Councillor Kurt Furgler, fun is today poked at the communicative efforts and shortcomings of the FDP federal councillor. Paradoxically, authenticity is actually deemed an extremely important quality by the public. And yet it is those federal councillors who systematically refuse to put a slant on their appearances and messages by using spin doctors, consultants and communication professionals who are the subject of constant derision.

His manner, although derided by politicians and media professionals, goes down extremely well with the public. He is comfortable with road-building apprentices, successful corporate executives or Swiss IT high-fliers at Google's headquarters in Mountain View, California: Federal Councillor Schneider-Ammann has the ability to quickly engage anyone in lively conversation. Showing genuine, unpretentious interest, Johann Schneider-Ammann leaves a lasting impression on many people.

His reserved approach to the peculiarities of the political system may be explained by the fact that he is a newcomer to politics. In 1981, the electrical engineering graduate from the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) joined the company owned by his wife's family in Langenthal. These were tough times for industry, but Schneider-Ammann rose quickly through the ranks and successfully steered the Ammann Group through the economically challenging 1980s and 1990s.

The latecomer's steep ascent

His political ambitions emerged at a late stage. In 1999, at the age of 47, he took over the presidency of Swissmem, the association

representing the Swiss mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and metal industries. He took the step to the National Council several months later.

When Hans-Rudolf Merz announced that he was standing down in 2010, Schneider-Ammann was the ideal candidate for the Free Democrats – a popular politician, a proven businessman and worthy association official, who – fortunately – had few ties with the much-maligned big banks and fat cats. On 22 September 2010, the Federal Assembly elected him and his cantonal colleague Simonetta Sommaruga to the Federal Council.

Although he has now settled in well at his Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research (EAER), the transformation from feisty business leader to tactically aware politician is still not quite complete. That became evident in the row over the recording of working hours. Federal government, employers and trade unions were at loggerheads for almost six years over how the obligation enshrined in employment law was to be applied. No solution was reached. Schneider-Ammann finally took decisive action. He asked all of the negotiating partners to leave the table apart from the two main parties. The issue was then quickly resolved.

Despite such an assertive tack he is often regarded as lacking vigour in the Federal Palace. Perhaps it is a case of crossed wires. His scepticism towards state intervention is well-known and he apparently often decides only after thorough evaluation not to act.

This was also the case after the "Swiss franc shock" in January 2015. There were cries for state intervention from all sides, including for a new minimum rate with the euro, for economic programmes and other measures. The minister of economic affairs listened patiently to all of the demands. He then decided to pursue that option that in light of the widespread alarmism would be difficult to defend. He did nothing.

How events unfolded now appears to have proven him right. The "Swiss franc shock" has turned out to be a minor tremor. Schneider-Ammann's cautious approach has not only saved the state a handsome sum of money but proved his tenacity and economic expertise. He will almost certainly require these two attributes during the 2016 presidential year.

CHRISTOPH LENZ IS A JOURNALIST IN BERNE. HE ACCOMPANIED FEDERAL COUNCILLOR JOHANN SCHNEIDER-AMMANN ON AN ECONOMIC AND SCIENTIFIC MISSION TO THE USA IN JULY 2015

