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The Parmelin effect has failed to materialise

The new SVP Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin called a halt to his predecessor's strategic arms deal in his first few months in office. He also created a political furore of his own. However, the election of a second SVP representative has not led to a significant shift to the right on the Federal Council so far.

MARKUS BROTSCHI

Ueli Maurer appeared to have handed over a Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS) in good shape to his successor and party colleague Guy Parmelin. The future development of the armed forces was to a large degree approved by Parliament back in 2015. Sufficient financial resources have also been secured. The conservative majority in the two chambers have made it clear several times that the army will receive CHF 5 billion a year and that fighter jets will soon return to the shopping list despite a referendum defeat.

Yet, the honeymoon period of the 56-year-old from the canton of Vaud did not last long. It soon became apparent that Parmelin would have to address a number of self-made problems in the army. At the end of March, the new defence minister surprisingly called a halt to his predecessor's "ground-based air defence" weapons project costing billions. This involved the acquisition of anti-aircraft missiles. Addressing the media, Parmelin justified the abandonment of the project by indicating that the renewal of the anti-aircraft systems had to be better aligned with the purchase of new fighter jets. However, the decisive factor may have been that both of the defence systems evaluated have shortcomings but the project committee responsible wanted to buy a first tranche of ground-to-air missiles anyway with the next armaments programme.

Maurer versus Parmelin

Intriguingly, the two SVP Federal Councillors publicly contradicted one another, an unusual occurrence in Swiss government convention. Responding to the media, Maurer remarked that he could not understand why Parmelin had applied the emergency brake as everything was "going well" with the ground-to-air defence project. Parmelin took a different view and ordered an administrative investigation. The head of the DDPS sought to establish not only what had gone wrong with the project but also which officers had leaked information leading to details about the missile deal ending up in the public domain.

Parmelin may not have been acting solely on his own initiative but also under pressure from his party. Parmelin now had to demonstrate the leadership strength that the SVP had previously lacked with Defence Minister Maurer. The fact that the new defence minister announced, a day after putting a stop to the ground-to-air missile project, that he was parting company with the head of the army, André Blattmann, would appear to fit in with this notion. Blattmann had fallen foul of the SVP as he had been working on reform of the armed forces with a further reduction of troops under Maurer. As is customary in such situations, Parmelin denied there were

internal reasons for Blattmann's early retirement in March 2017. However, an appearance by Blattmann in front of the general staff officers revealed that nerves were on edge in the army leadership. Blattmann branded the army member who had passed the documents on the ground-to-air missile project evaluation to the TV programme "Rundschau" as a "traitor". He hoped the person responsible would be "strung up", in the figurative sense.

Tax break as stumbling block

However, Parmelin was also guilty of a faux pas in his first few months. The former wine grower supported tax breaks on the sale of agricultural land in the Federal Council at a time when he himself still owned such a plot of development land. Shortly afterwards he assigned the land to his brother. When "Blick" made the affair public, Parmelin did not initially see any reason why he should have excluded himself from decision-making in the Federal Council over tax breaks on development land in agricultural areas. Parmelin, who came in for heavy public criticism, later conceded that while his conduct was above board legally he had made a mistake politically. While the German-speaking Swiss media predominantly conveyed the view that Parmelin had shown a lack of awareness, the media in French-speaking Switzerland perceived a conspiracy against "their" Federal Councillor. They felt that the criticism revealed the condescending attitude of German-speaking Swiss towards French-speaking Switzerland.

The election of a second SVP representative in place of BDP Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf has not led to a noticeable shift to the right thus far on the Federal Council. The SVP's dual representation is most likely to result in a more conservative approach to finance policy. The SVP nevertheless faces being overriden in national government over its key strategic issues of policy on Europe and asylum even with a second representative. The two SVP politicians are fighting a losing battle over policy on Europe in particular as both FDP Federal Councillors, the CVP representative Doris Leuthard and the two SP representatives are focussed on maintaining the bilateral treaties and wish to avoid a break with the EU at all costs. The additional Federal Council member has also so far failed to enable the SVP to make ground over asylum policy. The two SVP politicians were rebuffed with a call for tighter surveillance of the southern border by the army to intercept refugees. A change in the Federal Council's position cannot be ruled out though if an emergency asylum situation arises over the summer months.

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