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The new power constellation in the federal parliament

The strengthened right-wing majority is caught between political in-fighting and a “conservative turnaround”, while the left is isolated and alarmed. New political alliances are gradually taking shape.

JÜRG MÜLLER

The Social Democrats have raised the alarm. They say the conservative majority has “lost all sense of responsibility for the nation’s overall interests and the common good”. Furthermore, “the right-wing majority led by the SVP is bulldozing its way through. There is no longer any attempt to find a consensus. The SVP is dictating the direction, and the FDP and CVP are following meekly.” This pithy analysis by the SP is part of a “call to awkwardness” issued on 25 June.

The approach is not new. Addressing a party conference back in 1984 following the failure by the SP’s official candidate, Lilian Uchtenhagen, to be elected to the Federal Council, the then SP chairman, Helmut Hubacher, announced that his party would continue campaigning in an “extremely awkward” manner. However, the explosiveness of this statement had a limited impact in practice. Nonetheless, the term from 1984 has now been repeated in the latest rallying cry.

“Aggressive policy of tax breaks”

The Social Democrats are alarmed because right-of-centre parties have been in a stronger position since the parliamentary elections in October 2015. Added to this, the SVP, FDP and CVP appointed new leaders this spring in the form of Albert Rösti, Petra Gössi and Gerhard Pfister – all of whom hail from the right wing of their respective party. According to SP Chairman Christian Levrat, the “unified right” is also pursuing an “aggressive policy of tax breaks”. The prime example of this, he says, is the Corporate Tax Reform III bill, which was ap-

SP Chairman
Christian Levrat, shown here at the SP Switzerland party conference in Chur last June, backs a new political “awkwardness” by his party.

Photo: Keystone



proved by parliament in June. This alone will cut federal tax revenues by about CHF 1.5 billion. The SP has sought a referendum on the issue, thereby ushering in the first phase of its new “awkwardness”.

Bernese National Councillor and Greens Chairman Regula Rytz asserts that right-wing and conservative parties have entered an “era of ideologists” in which the quest for social equality has been replaced by short-sighted political patronage. Rytz says the hard line is most obvious in the government’s financial and fiscal policies. However, she believes this is untenable in the long term because the public has realised that the “policy of mass cutbacks” threatens Switzerland’s international commitments and its status as an educational location. Rytz says it is also remarkable how far to the right the CVP has shifted. For example, whereas the party had still supported the energy strategy in the last legislative period, “it is now involved in scaling back the targets”.

The CVP does indeed appear to be changing course under its new chairman, Gerhard Pfister. Pfister has shown himself to be extremely ambi-

tious. In the autumn of 2015, months before the elections, he wrote an article in the “Basler Zeitung” entitled “Thoughts on a conservative turnaround”. In this he said that although conservative parties had a clear majority in parliament, “a social democratic agenda is still gaining the upper hand on key issues”. Pfister claimed that this was because the FDP and CVP had broadened their agenda too far and that a “renaissance of conservative politics” was needed. The conditions: “The SVP would have to limit its radicalisation, the FDP its quest for power and the CVP the arbitrariness of its political programme”.

A conservative turnaround?

This constitutes clear criticism of Pfister’s predecessor, Christophe Darbellay, who maintained close ties with the small centre parties: the Green Liberals and the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP). In an article published in the June issue of “Schweizer Monat” magazine, Pfister distanced himself emphatically from both these parties. “These parties don’t have any part to play in the conservative turn-

around,” the new party chairman wrote. In his view, the turnaround – a frequently used expression – relates first and foremost to “joint positions” with the SVP and FDP.

However, it remains to be seen whether the conservative trio can reach a consensus on decisive issues. Speaking to “Swiss Review”, Bernese National Councillor and SVP Chairman Albert Rösti remained deliberately cautious on the matter. He said the new leaders of the three conservative parties were collaborating very well and had “a trusting relationship”. Nevertheless he stressed that “a joint project is not planned and cooperation is on a case-by-case basis”. After all, he added, what counted was not only the party leaders but primarily the shift in the balance of power in parliament and on the Federal Council. “Some improvements” could be seen with regard to taxation and social contributions in particular, Rösti said, alluding to the Corporate Tax Reform III bill. In energy strategy, too, he pointed out that “certain problems” had been eliminated and earlier parliamentary decisions overturned.

European policies without conservative unity

Nevertheless, this cannot hide the fact that Switzerland’s conservative parties still have major differences over issues like asylum, immigration and European policies. One thorn in the country’s side, according to Rösti, is the FDP’s attitude towards the mass immigration initiative, the widespread implementation of which the Free Democrats would oppose. He also described as “disappointing” the attitude of the Federal Council, which he accuses of taking “left-wing” decisions on numerous issues even though it now has a clear SVP/FDP majority.

Schwyz National Councillor Petra Gössi, the chairman of FDP Switzer-

land, doesn’t think much has changed recently. “Parliament doesn’t function very differently from how it did before the 2015 elections, and the majorities still change,” she says. For instance, the FDP sometimes agrees with the SP on social issues. However, because financial, fiscal and economic topics are centre stage at the moment, alliances between the conservative parties are currently in the foreground and simply easier to forge thanks to more pronounced majorities.

But Gössi attacks the Swiss People’s Party on one key issue: “The SVP does everything it can to shoot down bilateral treaties with the EU. That’s a dangerous game. Ceilings and quotas are out of the question for us when implementing the mass immigration initiative. The maintenance of our bilateral agreements is therefore a top priority for the FDP.”

According to Claude Longchamps, a political scientist and the head of the GfS Research Institute in Berne, the FDP has deliberately drawn a clear line in the sand over this because it is extremely keen to save Switzerland’s bilateral agreements for economic reasons. In this respect, he sees touchpoints between the Free Democrats and the left-wing parties. In all other respects, the SP has had far less room for manoeuvre since last year’s elections and the appointment of the three new conservative party leaders. Although the Council of States continues to function in a relatively non-partisan way, Longchamps says, the alliances still change frequently and individual councillors stray from the party line. By contrast, the shift in the balance of power is plain to see in the National Council and Federal Council.

The actual majority has been lost

Longchamps says the SP has “lost its actual majority” in the Federal Council because both the SVP and the FDP now have two seats. Prior to the elec-

tions, this majority had worked thanks to the presence of Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf from the minor BDP. “The energy turnaround and even Swiss banking policy were based on having two SP councillors, one CVP and one BDP member,” Longchamps says. FDP Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter has therefore now become the decisive member. Although he occasionally votes in favour of centre-left ideas, “he is not bound into this constellation”. Quite the contrary. He is the subject of increasingly close scrutiny by the SVP in particular, which considers the FDP its most important partner.

Longchamps also sees rivalry between the FDP and CVP. Under its new chairman, Gerhard Pfister, the Christian Democrats want to be “better on business” than the FDP. As a result, he says, they are more willing to join forces with the SVP than the FDP on agriculture and commerce, for example. Longchamps thinks Pfister wants the CVP to portray itself more strongly as the new centrist force and that he also holds conservative views on social and family issues. “His predecessor, Christophe Darbellay, looked to the left and to the right and then took what he wanted at that time,” Longchamps recalls. That repeatedly gave the SP new opportunities. SP Chairman Christian Levrat had been able to garner a majority in certain areas and therefore influence the political agenda through the use of what Longchamps describes as “sensible offers” to the CVP and BDP. But that isn’t working any more. “The parties of the left no longer have a battle plan for how to actively forge their own majorities,” Claude Longchamps asserts.