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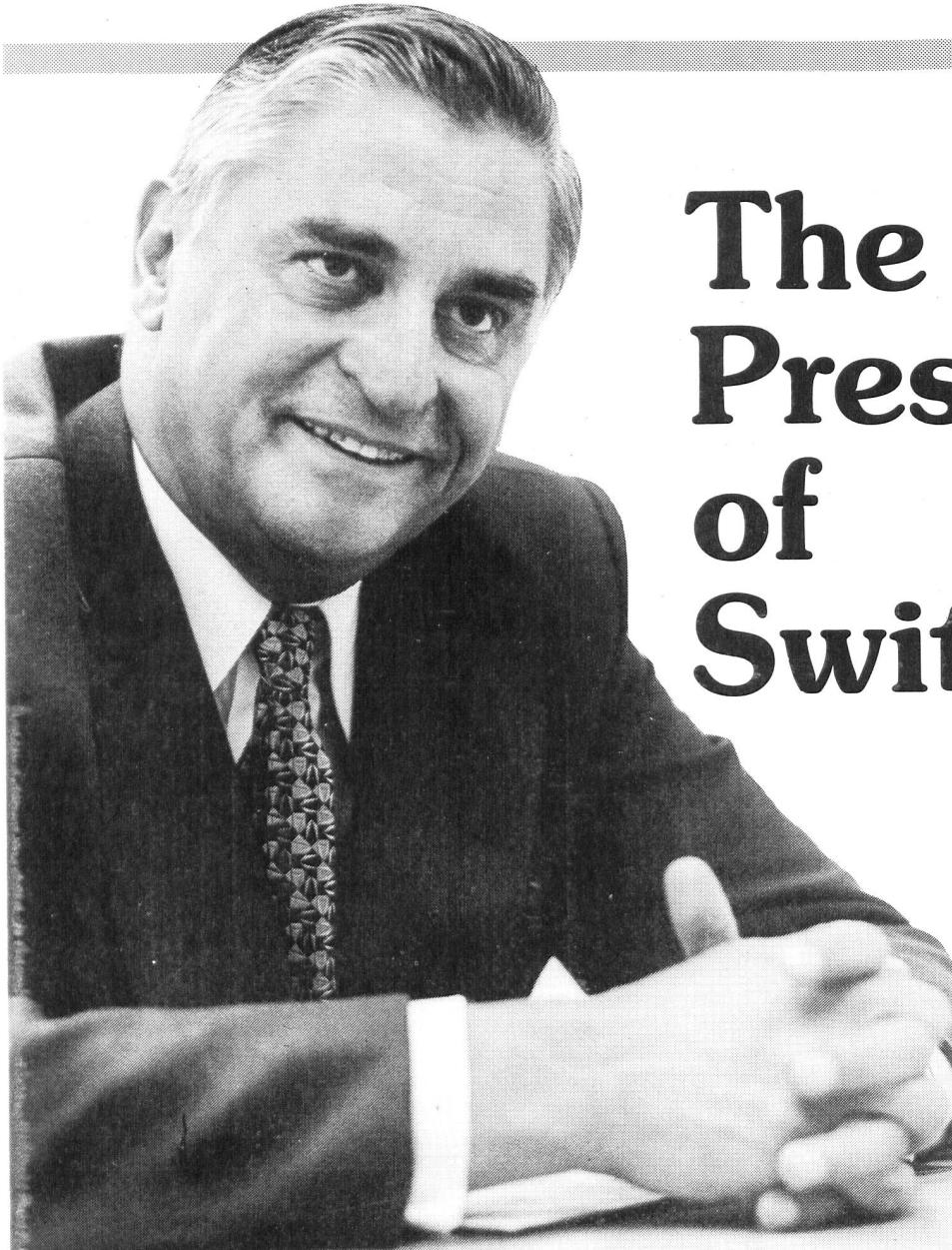
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# The President of Switzerland

*– the man nobody knows*

## Fritz Honegger

President of the Swiss Confederation for 1982

**BORN** July 25, at Bischofszell (Canton Thurgau). Citizen of Fischenthal and Ruschlikon (Canton Zurich).

Studies in political economy at the University of Zurich, graduating in 1941 with a doctoral thesis on "Vergleichende Betrachtungen über das Erhebungsverfahren bei den direkten Bundessteuern" (Comparative Analysis of the Levy Procedure with Direct Federal Taxes).

In 1942, he obtained his first post at La Chaux-de-Fonds as secretary (German speaking) to the Swiss Federation of Watch Manufacturers.

In 1944 he was appointed secretary to the Silk Industry Association of Zurich, a position he retained until 1961 on becoming director of the Zurich Chamber of Commerce.

True to Swiss tradition, Mr Honegger has gained his political experience at all levels of public affairs. He entered politics in 1957

when he was elected Cantonal Councillor of Zurich and Mayor of Ruschlikon, an office he held for eight years.

In 1965/66 he was President of the Cantonal Parliament of Zurich. Mr Honegger was elected Deputy of Canton Zurich to the Swiss senate in 1967 with an impressive majority, his parliamentary activities concentrating mainly on economic and monetary matters, as well as on foreign and social policies.

In 1974 Mr Honegger was elected chairman of the Radical Democrat Party, and three years later became one of Switzerland's seven Federal Councillors.

He was appointed head of the Swiss Economics Ministry in February 1978.

Mr Honegger is married with two sons, and holds the military rank of infantry colonel.

THE Swiss have a new President this year – as they do every year, in fact.

To readers unfamiliar with Swiss affairs, such a situation might seem to indicate a certain lack of continuity and cohesion in the running of the country. In reality, however, it symbolises the world's most stable and dependable democracy.

For under Switzerland's unique political system – based on a tradition of compromise rather than confrontation – the seven ministers in the country's four-party Federal Council always take it in turn to be President. And it's a system that dates back 134 years. The post of President goes to the longest-serving minister, who fills the appointment from January 1 to December 31. He may serve more than one term, but never for consecutive years.

While serving as President he also retains his post as minister which, in fact, remains his main task. It all adds up to a process which resembles a political game of musical chairs.

Although the election is a foregone formality, succession to the post of President is nevertheless subject to a joint ballot by the two houses of the Swiss parliament. At the same time the second longest-serving minister is elected Vice-President and is thus assured of "promotion" to the presidency one year later.

Yet the annual elections to these rotating



The new Swiss President? I don't know, but it's probably another of those government ministers . . . — from the *Berner Zeitung*

responsibilities are so uneventful that many Swiss citizens soon forget who the President and Vice-President are, even if they knew in the first place.

The temporary honour does not make the President head of state in the true sense of the term. Switzerland's real head of state is the entire Federal Council, whose seven members — despite their often opposing political interests and ideologies — take all major decisions collectively. The President merely presides over the Federal Council meetings, and is often referred to in Switzerland as a *primus inter pares* — a first among equals.

As The Times of London once observed: "It is all a remarkable demonstration of the Swiss distrust of any one person becoming too powerful, and of the urge to safeguard the country against individual fallibility."

The President of Switzerland enjoys no particular powers, his family no special favours.

In the 1960s the daughter of the then President came to England — like thousands of other Swiss girls — to work as an au pair girl and improve her English. When the news leaked out in Britain, newspapers here were soon publishing pictures and articles about the President's daughter peeling potatoes and going down on her hands and knees to wield a scrubbing brush.

The publicity was duly noted back in Switzerland, but in terms of the strongest disapproval. The Swiss Press and public alike simply could not understand what all the fuss was about.

The story is also told of another Swiss President of recent years whose official transport broke down while he was travelling to an important engagement. He hitch-hiked a lift the rest of the way from an astonished

foreign motorist.

The President for 1982 is 64-year-old Economics Minister Fritz Honegger, who has been a member of the Federal Council for the past five years. But ask any Swiss, and the chances are that few will know his name.

Less than a month after his election to the Presidency, and only a few days before he actually took office, I put the question to 11 adult Swiss. Only two of them knew.

□ □ □

A FEW years ago a friend of mine remarked that the glory of Switzerland was that no one knew who her President was. No people outside Switzerland have heard of him, and few inside. After all, the job of a government is not to supply entertainment for foreign newspaper readers but to govern the country efficiently. This the Swiss Federal Council does. And God save Switzerland and the world from the day when we all learn the Swiss President's name.

— **Switzerland for Beginners,**  
by George Mikes (published  
by André Deutsch Ltd, London).

NAME the President of Switzerland. You can't. And quite a lot of Swiss would have to scratch their heads. Almost his only special

chore is to do rather more hand-shaking of visiting foreign dignitaries than his cabinet colleagues do.

— **The Economist, London.**

ASK any five Swiss (including the cream of the country's youth) the name of their country's President. If two of them can give you the correct answer you will be quite lucky.

— **The Student Guide to Switzerland.**

ASK a Swiss to name his President and the chances are very good that he will not know. He might even add that it doesn't matter much.

— **The Swiss Journal, San Francisco.**