

Elections 1995: portraits of the parties. Part II, Christian democrats: the "dynamic centre"?

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Elections 1995: portraits of the parties (II)

Christian Democrats: the "dynamic centre"?

Switzerland's present Christian Democratic Party (CVP) was founded in 1912 with the name of "Swiss Conservative People's Party".

The delegates of that time rejected a proposal from the French speakers and some representatives from Soleure and Basle who would have preferred "Catholic" to "Conservative". This could have closed the door to other

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Christians. But even though it has always consistently refused to include "Catholic" in its name, the party has never held much attraction for Protestants, and today only 3 of the 53 members of the CVP parliamentary group are Protestants. And one of these is not even a member of the party but simply associated with the group. "One of our federal judges is also a Protestant", points out National Councillor Vital Darbellay, a member of the CVP's Christian Social wing.

Shift to the right

This Christian Social wing may be described as the reformist element of the "dynamic centre" which the Christian Democratic Party claims to be – a sort of spur which has enabled it to hold the middle ground between liberalism and socialism and avoid class struggle. At present this wing includes only 8 of the 52 CVP members of the federal parliament, and in the last few years it has been overtaken by what the historian Urs Altermatt describes as the "economic lobby", the Economy and Society Working Group. "What matters is not so much the number but the importance of those belonging to the various streams, and the Christian Social wing includes some very influential members of parliament", says CVP press chief Hanspeter Merz. Even so it cannot be

denied that there has been a shift to the right during the last few years.

The Christian Democrats were responsible more than any other party for the way things went in Switzerland in the 1950s. In 1954 the Socialist, Max Weber, resigned from the Federal Council after a dispute about reforming the federal finances. This left the CVP equal to the Liberal Democrats in the government: with three seats each, the seventh going to the Swiss People's Party (SVP). A few years later the process culminated in the creation of the "magic formula" for the composition of the government which still holds good: division of power between the four main political groups in the country (two Liberal Democrats, two Christian Democrats, two Social Democrats and one seat for the Swiss People's Party). This formula, which dates from 1959, was the work of the CVP secretary of the time, Martin Rosenberg.

Today the CVP is represented in the Federal Council by Arnold Koller of Appenzell, head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police, and Flavio Cotti of Ticino, who runs the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs. The present chairman, recently elected, is State Councillor Anton Cottier of Fribourg.

The CVP has the second highest number of seats in the Federal Assembly (36 in the National Council and 16 in the Council of States) and received the third largest amount of votes at the last general election (just behind the Social Democrats). It is represented in virtually all parts of the country, but its strongholds are in the Catholic areas.

Solidarity, liberty, subsidiarity

The CVP sees itself as a centre party, modern and open to the world, "with the individual at the heart of its policies". In "Strong Points of Christian Democratic Policy", approved last May at the CVP annual conference, we may read: "It founds its policy on a Christian ideal-

ogy inspired by the principles of solidarity, liberty and subsidiarity". It considers the traditional family as the central institution of society and is in favour of a social market economy at the service of the individual. It wants a new type of solidarity based on the principle of subsidiarity: "What the individual and the family can do themselves should not be the responsibility of the community, tasks which municipal authorities can carry out should not be transferred to cantonal authorities, and the federal government should respect cantonal jurisdiction".

"In practice", notes Eugène Claret in his 'Political Parties in Switzerland', "the Christian Democratic Party represents a compromise between two extremes: between individualism and collectivism; between capitalism without restraint and the class struggle; between the concentration of financial power and socialism". Its custom of looking for compromises and the difficulties it has in reconciling interests within it, often widely diverging, sometimes gives it an image of lack of purpose and opportunism. "Before making up its mind, the CVP raises its finger not to vote but to test the wind!" say its detractors. ■



With Federal Councillors Arnold Koller (left) and Flavio Cotti on either side, General Secretary Raymond Loretan (behind) and Party Chairman Anton Cottier welcome the CVP's new concept, which should lead the party to success in election year '95. (Photo: Keystone)

Christian Democratic Party (CVP)
 Founded: 1912; Members: about 80,000
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