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(From left) Georges-André Chevallaz, Cornelia Diethelm and Iwan Rickenbacher in discussion with René Lenzin and Pierre-André Tschanz. (Photos: Michael Stahl)

Three generations talk about the future of Swiss politics

“To breathe some new life into Switzerland and its institutions”

How will the parliament elected this October face up to the challenges of the future? Does Switzerland's political system need reform after 150 years? How is national cohesion faring? A discussion with Georges-André Chevallaz, Iwan Rickenbacher and Cornelia Diethelm.

Swiss Review: The parliament to be elected this autumn will take us to the edge of the next millennium. It will have to tackle many problems in both domestic and foreign policy. Will it be able to cope?

Georges-André Chevallaz: I can only reply that I am not the Lord God and I am absolutely unable to predict whether the parliament to be elected in October will be able to cope with the situation. I must say that it is going to be an extremely difficult job. We are living in an age of very profound revolutionary change. We do not know where we are heading. But we are travelling very quickly, and we have not mastered the huge technical, scientific and industrial process which is in continual development. We cannot deal with it by political willpower alone.

Iwan Rickenbacher: As former Federal Councillor Chevallaz has just said,

the challenges at the threshold of the 21st century are really formidable. Some of them have never been met with before. Mankind is now faced with problems which cannot be solved by simply resorting to earlier models and past experience. This means that parliament, the whole political system and government at all levels will have to redefine their responsibilities, perhaps even change their structures.

Cornelia Diethelm: I tend to share the pessimistic view, but I do ask myself if things were ever better. It is always a matter of proportion. We are in a more complicated world, but we also have a higher level of education and better international contacts nowadays. I do not believe that there will ever be a parliament which will be able to solve the problems once and for all because there have always been problems in politics. But in the future I think it is going to be

rather difficult if the government remains a coalition as at present. I believe that consensus itself is a problem and

Members of the panel

Georges-André Chevallaz (80) was mayor of Lausanne from 1958–1973 and national councillor from 1959–1973. In 1973 he was elected to the Federal Council, where he was finance minister until 1979 and then defence minister until 1983. He is a member of the Liberal Democratic Party.

Iwan Rickenbacher (52) was general secretary of the Christian Democratic Party from 1988–1992. Since 1992 he has been a director and partner of the Jäggi Communications public relations agency in Berne. He also teaches political communication at Berne University.

Cornelia Diethelm (23) is responsible for organising the Youth Parliament run by the National Youth Council of Switzerland. In 1992 she herself took part in a meeting of this parliament. In 1993 and 1994 she was a volunteer member of its organising committee. She is a member of the Social Democratic Party.

that because of the need for it things are really a bit too sluggish.

Rickenbacher: I am not pessimistic. I am assuming that solutions to the real problems will have to be found. But not all of them will be solved in parliament and in the government. They may have to be dealt with in other areas of competence. There is a possibility of shifting or privatising problems which today are the responsibility of government. We are in the middle of a phase of transformation but the deeper problems must be addressed. If the government or the parliament do not do it, someone else will have to.

Ms. Diethelm, you have mentioned our modern political institutions which will be 150 years old in three years time. What changes or reforms will have to be made in our institutions so that those in power are at least better prepared in the short term to face up to the huge challenges we are talking about?

Diethelm: I would start by increasing popular rights, perhaps by extending the initiative system to legislation. I am against government by consensus. I think that going in a definite direction is more important than agreement. I would like to be able to say I am in a minority on an issue, or else I am in a majority. Also I think that politics is not just a matter for parliament and business but that we should really be trying to make ordinary citizens more politically involved. Today it is only a small elite and a few idealists who always vote. It seems to me to be important for the future that the wider public should stand behind political decisions and should understand what is going on.

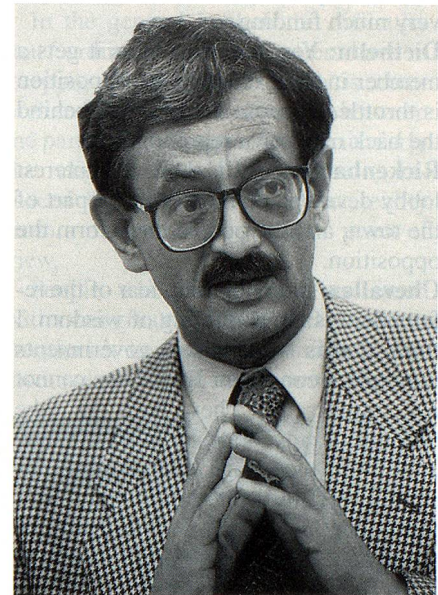
Chevallaz: I am diametrically opposed to that view. I do not believe that by descending right down the scale and expecting every citizen to know what is going on you are going to help matters. You will simply create confusion. This is because God has not given everyone abilities in the same way. You say that the younger generation is better educated. I do not believe that. I think it is less well educated. In the universities I no longer see the generalists whom we knew who could teach history from ancient times right up till the present day. What is lacking is universal culture, and that in my view is very serious.

But with respect to institutional reform would you agree with Ms. Diethelm?

Chevallaz: I am in favour of a very clear separation of powers. I would like to see a government which has real authority and which gives direction to parliament and to the population and indeed to the whole business of government. I would prefer this to be done by consensus rather than government by a single party. In Switzerland we are very different types of people, and we have to get on amongst ourselves. And consensus does not mean that nothing gets done. There have been many great achievements under consensus. If I think of the post-war period, of the enormous changes we have experienced in technology, in social matters, in all sorts of fields, it is through consensus that we have been able to bring about the radical reforms needed.

Rickenbacher: I think that State Councillors Gilles Petitpierre and René Rhinow have shown with their proposals for reform of parliament and the executive that this is an institutional necessity. This should include reform of the administration, where it is also needed at least in part. The question also arises as to whether the Federal Council with its collective responsibility should not be discharged of certain tasks, i.e. the issue of new state secretaries. The problem of distributing responsibilities between the federal and

subjects. In this country people do not take elections so seriously because they know that they can always intervene again through a referendum. This is a shame because if elections are no longer taken seriously the right men and women will not be elected. I am afraid that the level of attraction of political



Iwan Rickenbacher: "If elections are no longer taken seriously the right men and women will not be elected."



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cantonal governments has become bogged down. As to political awareness, I believe that people are relatively well informed when they vote on specific

office has fallen, and this means that it will be difficult to keep really good people.

Let us return to a point mentioned by Ms. Diethelm: on the one hand to increase popular rights, and on the other to move away from consensus democracy to opposing parties. Can the latter work in combination with an extension of popular rights in referendum matters?

Rickenbacher: Everyone who says we should abandon consensus at the federal level will have to ask themselves whether a national majority government can be combined with cantonal governments or municipal councils in the big towns still based on consensus. This could lead to really difficult situations. Also, we are after all the only country in the world which can change its constitution four times a year! In our system this element of institutional uncertainty is offset in some degree as a result of consensus. This helps to compensate for any hiccoughs which may occur as a result of referendum democracy.

Diethelm: I think the consensus system should be got rid of right down to the municipal level. It is simply that I see too many disadvantages when the minority shares responsibility and in consequence there is no sense of opposition.

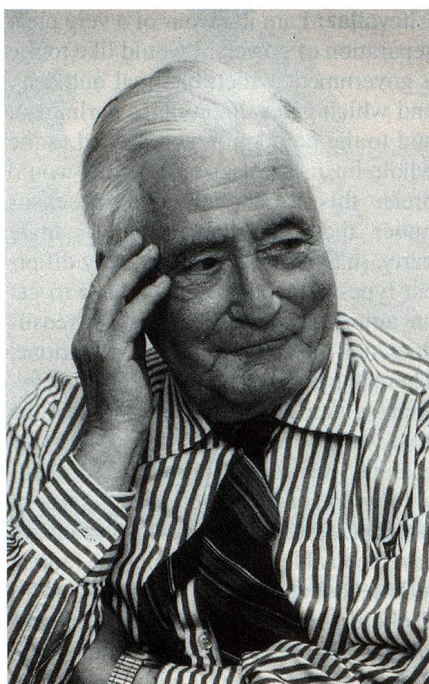
Rickenbacher: But a well organised group can provide opposition today at the municipal level – and even without very much funding.

Diethelm: Yes, but as soon as it gets a member in the executive the opposition is throttled because it cannot go behind the back of its own representative.

Rickenbacher: But then an interest lobby develops in a district or a part of the town, and the people there form the opposition.

Chevallaz: In my opinion fear of the referendum is the beginning of wisdom. I think that is what makes governments maintain a consistent line. They cannot act unilaterally. They have to take account of any opposition which may arise from a national referendum. It is simply this: the government must be a team combining different interests if we are to have consensus. And they have to learn from each other. I assure you that one does learn. I was very glad to be in government with the Socialists and the Christian Democrats, so I did not have to work only with my own Liberal Democrats. This was very gratifying. The system creates diversity actually within the government, and that is a good thing. Do you really want a system of alternating between majorities, as practised in Britain and France? The example of those two countries is quite enough to put me off.

We are at present going through a decade of celebrations, commemorations and anniversaries. These are always occasions on which questions are asked about this country, about



Georges-André Chevallaz: "In Switzerland we are very different types of people, and we have to get on amongst ourselves."

the state it is in and how it got there. And what it is going to become. Against this background, do you see a threat to national cohesion?

Chevallaz: I would not exaggerate this because I do not much believe in the famous language barrier or whatever it is. We have enough relationships with our German-speaking confederates – party relationships, religious affinities, for example. Schwitterdütsch dialect is a bit of a problem, but I think that there are too many links between us for an end to cohesion to be conceivable. It must be said that the idea has been conjured up artificially by some newspapers and other media. The anti-Swiss German spirit which has grown up in the last few years in the French-speaking part is the creation of the press, television and a few politicians looking for trouble.

Rickenbacher: I do believe there are differences in mentality, different ways of looking at a number of fundamental questions. It would be a good thing to possess instruments which make these distinctive ways of viewing things more widely known. And here I notice that ignorance is increasing on both sides. For me this is much more of a threat than the language barrier. People have more or less stopped taking notice of each other. This element goes right up to

relationships in parliament, where there are too many people from both the big national language groups who are not even able to understand their colleagues when they talk in their own language. It is this lack of understanding which is the problem.

Chevallaz: I entirely agree with you, and I think that contact – particularly between responsible people in industry, in the churches, in politics – should be strengthened. I lived for 25 years with the federal parliament, and I did notice a difference. At the beginning we were welcomed by our German-speaking colleagues, and it was very easy to make friends with them. I do not think this is the same today. When they eat together there are French speakers in one corner and German speakers in another.

Diethelm: There is some kind of logic in that, since it is tiring to talk in the other language. But I do not believe that we have a real language barrier. If two people really have something to say to each other or when it is important, then things work out all right. Switzerland's multilingual character is also a good way of preparing for the multi-cultural society of the future.

To end this discussion, would you have a word of advice to give to the new parliament which will be elected in the autumn?

Chevallaz: It should exercise its responsibilities and not go beyond them. It should leave the government to its responsibilities – because in the last few years there has been systematic and continuous intrusion by parliament into matters which are the concern of the government. The latter's freedom to act has been limited, its credit and its authority diminished.

Diethelm: I would like to see a parliament which is very well informed about what it is discussing, which brings us nearer to European integration and which lays emphasis on ecological and social matters.

Rickenbacher: I hope that the new parliament will regard the great challenges before it not only as a danger which we must defend ourselves against but also as an opportunity – an opportunity to breathe some new life into this Switzerland of ours and its institutions, as well as to remind us of the values which our country has really lived by and perhaps to reactivate them.

Panel chairmen: René Lenzin and Pierre-André Tschanz

SRI

Swiss Radio International will provide regular coverage of the campaign, in the week preceding election day, October 22: information on the main issues at stake, as well as reports on the major parties and their political platforms. Right after the elections, our parliamentary correspondents will analyse the results and explain the consequences in terms which make sense to people living outside the country.