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Rumblings in the party landscape

ROLF RIBI

Switzerland is well-known for its stable party system. But the political landscape has been changing since the 1990s, and the National Council elections to be held in October may produce a more marked polarisation.

“**SWITZERLAND WAKES** up with a sore head,” wrote Lausanne’s “24 heures” newspaper on the morning after the parliamentary election in October 1999. On the same day Zurich’s “Tages-Anzeiger” headlines read “Switzerland veers to the right”. The results were certainly unusual. The Swiss People’s Party (SVP) won no less than 15 seats in the 200-member National Council and, with 44 seats, was the second-strongest party and the strongest centre-right faction in the chamber. By a combination of patriotic outbursts, calls for tax cuts and tirades

against opening our country up, the SVP had successfully appealed to a great many dissatisfied voters.

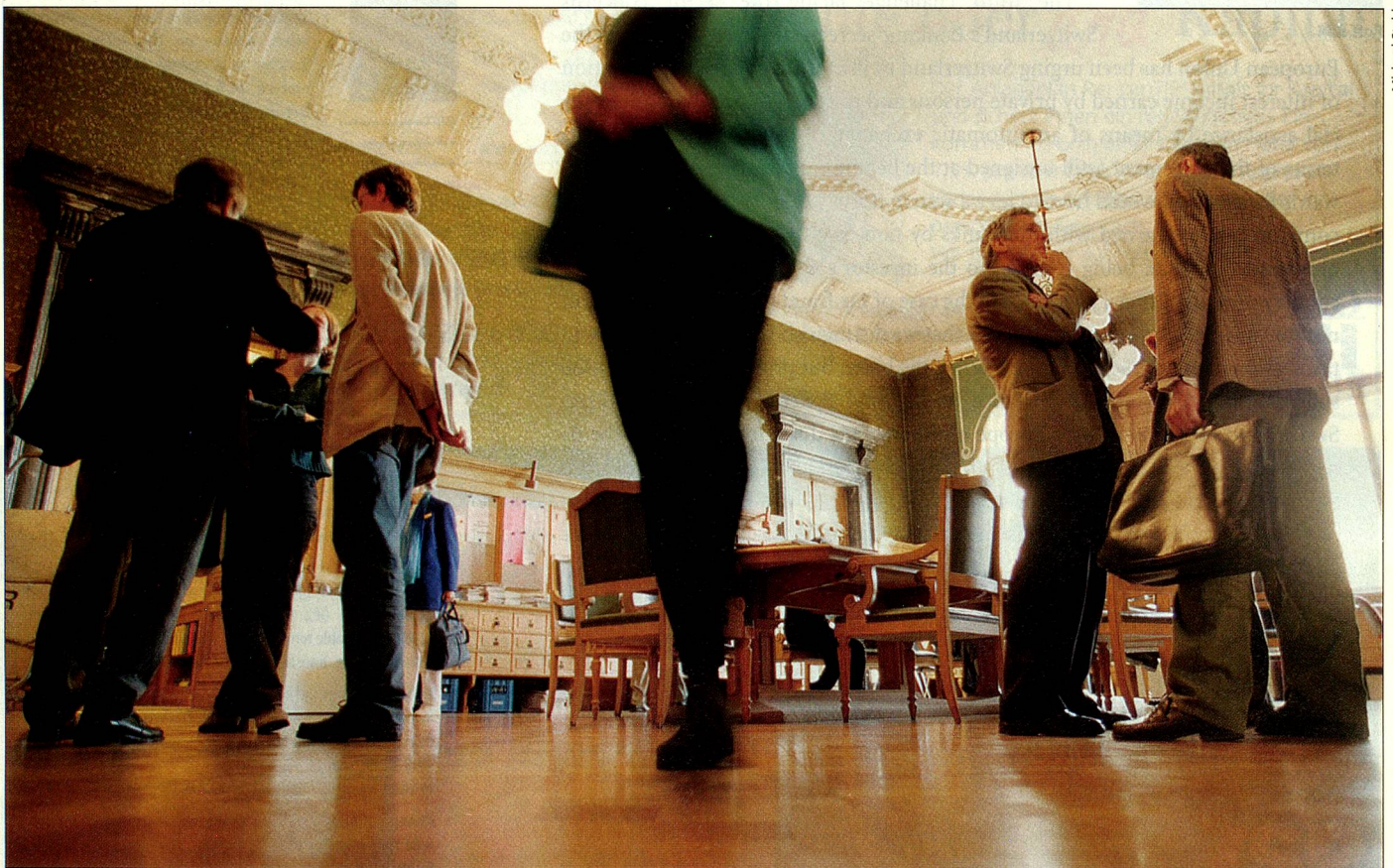
Four years ago the losers in the federal elections were easy to spot: The Radical Free Democratic Party (FDP) lost two seats and, with only 43 seats, were ousted as the strongest centre-right power for the first time in the history of the Swiss confederation. Winner of the 1995 election, the Social Democratic Party (SPS) had to relinquish three seats but with 51 seats remained the strongest party in the National Council. The

Christian Democratic People’s Party (CVP) managed to win one more seat and gained a total of 35 seats in the large chamber.

On closer analysis, the allegedly “historic success” of the Swiss People’s Party is less resounding. The majority ratios among voters and parliament did not change dramatically:

- With its success in all regions the SVP increased its share of the vote from 14.9 percent to 22.6 percent (the SPS achieved 22.5 percent). However, the national conservative party gained its fifteen new National Council seats primarily at the cost of the extreme right (seven seats from the Freedom Party, two from the Swiss Democrats and one from the Liberals). So while it would be wrong to talk of a “shift to the right”, the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” was closer to the mark when it described the trend as a “tilt of the axis to the right”.

- The Radical Free Democrats remained the strongest faction in the United Federal Assembly (National Council and Council of



Michael Stahl

19 October may see a shakeup in Switzerland’s political makeup.

States) with a total of 61 seats, followed by the Social Democrats with 57 seats. Then came the SVP with 51 seats, just ahead of the Christian Democrats (CVP) with 50 seats. Thus the strengths of the four government parties were not much at variance. The share of the vote accounted for by the four Federal Council parties increased to over 80 percent, negating any reason to question the "magic formula" which has been followed for more than half a century and dictates that the Federal Council be composed of two Social Democrats, two Radical Free Democrats, two Christian Democrats and one Swiss People's Party representative.

The Fifth Switzerland contributed to the outcome of the National Council elections for the second time since voting by mail was introduced. Some 70,000 of the 573,000 registered Swiss Abroad were on the electoral roll, and an estimated 40 percent exercised their right to vote.

Cantonal elections: a barometer

What has happened in the Swiss party-political landscape over the past four years?

The party-political barometer maintained by the GfS Research Institute in Berne gives some interesting answers. The survey is based on the results of cantonal parliamentary elections, i.e. the strength of the parties among the population rather than the strength of a party in parliament.

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) has been the clear winner in cantonal parliamentary elections held between autumn 1999 and the early summer of 2003. On average the SVP gained 5 percent more votes and won 160 seats in 24 cantons. The red-green camp also made gains: while the Greens increased their share of the vote by at least one percent, the Social Democrats gained half a percent more votes. The largest losses in cantonal parliamentary elections were suffered by the Radical Free Democrats (1.8 percent fewer votes) and the Christian Democrats (0.8 percent fewer votes). Almost all the small parties to the right of the political spectrum (namely the Swiss Democrats and the Lega dei Ticinesi) suffered in the wake of the SVP's victories.

More information can be obtained by looking at party trends by canton: the SVP gained strength in almost all cantonal parliamentary elections with the exception of Glarus. The party's resounding success in the federal elections four years ago boosted

its profile. But the positive trend has slowed down since the summer of 2002. Political scientist Claude Longchamp now points to a "slowdown in cantonal elections" for the SVP.

Over the past four years the Social Democrats have enjoyed mixed political fortunes. After bitter losses in Basle City and Geneva, the SPS enjoyed a comeback in Switzerland's most densely populated canton, Zurich. The Christian Democrats suffered severe defeats in Nidwalden and Obwalden and also lost in St. Gallen, Basle Country, Lucerne, Aargau and the Ticino. The best result within this legislature period was chalked up by the CVP in Thurgau. The Liberal Democrats were also among the losers in cantonal elections, with severe losses in St. Gallen, Schwyz, Vaud, Valais, Obwalden and Nidwalden, the Jura, Zug, Basle Country, Lucerne and Zurich, but slight gains in Thurgau and Neuchâtel.

Claud Longchamp, Head of the GfS Research Institute, summarises the situation thus: Cantonal parliamentary elections which have been held within the past four years are a continuation of the restructuring of the party-political landscape which began four years ago with the National Council elections. To talk of a shift in voter's allegiances to the right would be wrong. Rather, there is a process of bipolarisation taking place in the Swiss party-political landscape, with the right and left ends of the spectrum gaining in strength. This centrifugal force is causing problems among larger parties at the centre. The FDP and CVP are registering defection to the right and left. All in all, the Swiss party system is in a state of flux. "The main characteristic since the end of the 1990s is the formation of a national conservative right in the form of the SVP."

How the population intends to vote

A few months ahead of the National Council elections to be held in October 2003, how do voters intend to vote? What are the main issues on the minds of the general public, and which party is regarded as the most competent to deal with which issue? A number of polls are attempting to find the answers to these questions, including the SRG-SSR election barometer 03 conducted by the GfS Research Institute.

The most popular question posed in all these surveys is: If the National Council elections were to take place next Sunday,

which party would you vote for? According to the GfS poll conducted last April, the SVP would gain 2.8 percent more votes than four years ago and achieve a 25 percent share of the vote. The SP could improve its share by 1.7 percent to 24 percent, while the FDP's share would drop by 0.7 percent to 19 percent and the CVP's by 1.6 percent to 14 percent. According to political scientist Longchamp's survey, the outcome would be a "moderate, slightly asymmetrical polarisation" of the party-political landscape. In other words, a strengthening of parties at both ends of the political spectrum, somewhat more on the right-wing SVP side than on the left-wing SPS side, and overall less radical than in the 1990s.

What current issues are the main concern of people in Switzerland and which party is regarded as having the most credible manifesto? Five issues are at the forefront of voters' minds: unemployment and the state of the economy (32 percent), asylum issues (26 percent), health care and health insurance premiums (22 percent), retirement pensions (21 percent) and public finances (13 percent). The economy topped the list of concerns nation-wide, followed in second place by asylum matters in German-speaking Switzerland and health care in French and Italian speaking Switzerland, with retirement pensions taking third place nation-wide.

The results of the question on party manifestos were surprising: 53 percent of respondents believe no single party was capable of solving all the problems. As far as solving asylum and tax problems was concerned, the SVP gained the most confidence, while the SPS were regarded as being most capable of solving unemployment and health problems. Neither the CVP nor FDP were trusted to resolve the top issues, while for the first time the Liberal Democrats lost ground on their economic platform.

The turnout for the 1999 National Council elections was 43.4 percent (as opposed to 46 percent four years previously). This time round political experts anticipate a higher turnout. Just who will benefit from this will be revealed only on the evening of 19 October, when Swiss TV broadcasts a mammoth post mortem with the presidents of the major parties.

Questions

How do you intend to tackle the rise in health insurance premiums? How is the AHV to be securely funded over the medium and long term?

How do you intend to kick-start the economy after a decade of weak growth and rising unemployment?

Christian Democratic People's Party



In terms of reforming the health insurance law the CVP supports a one-step transition to monistic financing i.e. single-source funding by 2007. Additional funds must be injected into the AHV by raising VAT by one percentage point in order to address demographic changes. Implementation of the AHV revision must be rapid.

SMEs must be promoted. The boundary conditions must be improved e.g. by reducing administrative expenses incurred by SMEs, making the job market more flexible, promoting the transfer of innovation via the Committee for Technology and Innovation and via universities, and by avoiding the introduction of new taxes.

Green Party



The per capita premium system must be replaced by an income-indexed system, and costs must be held down through better planning and coordination and a standardized health insurance. AHV financing is secured until 2025. An ecological tax reform could provide an additional source of financing.

Continual growth is impossible for ecological reasons. There are limits to the world and its natural resources. We need to adopt a new approach: invest in future-proof technologies, cut down working hours, and promote part-time work.

Evangelical People's Party



Our nation must live a healthier lifestyle (less stress, alcohol and drugs), eat more healthily and exercise more. And the overwhelming tendency to rely on medical services and benefits must be curtailed. The EVP supports all measures which address the acknowledged basic problems.

The government and cantons must tackle urgent problems (education, transport, environment, health care etc.) and invest in an anti-cyclical manner. The money is available if we do away with ruinous tax concession programmes for the super-rich.

Radical Free Democratic Party



As far as health care is concerned, new incentives for service providers should be introduced in order to put a brake on rising costs. Economic and socially acceptable reforms (flexible retirement age etc.) must secure the AHV in the long term – also for Swiss nationals drawing their pension abroad.

We need a flexible labour market and an effective family-friendly, interest-oriented migration policy. Healthy competition, entrepreneurial freedom and an education, finance, tax and social policy geared to high added value would promote growth and create jobs.

Liberal Party



Services should no longer be extended, while economic incentives and cost consciousness on the part of persons using the health care services should be promoted. The retirement age will need to be put back in order to secure some of the financing for the AHV.

The following conditions must be met: balanced federal finances, reduction in the tax rate through tax concessions, attractive conditions for business, a more efficient infrastructure and a more flexible job market.

Social Democratic Party



Following the failure of the "Affordable health care" initiative, a simpler social model must be designed which takes middle incomes into consideration and is financed without revenues from value added tax. Also, health care planning must be better coordinated. AHV: a policy of full employment, one percent more VAT from 2010, and a share of National Bank profits.

The state cannot reduce its spending as long as the economy remains stagnant. On the contrary, it is important to increase spending on education, research and innovation. Monetary policy must support the export industry. And, if necessary, research programmes for future markets should be launched.

Swiss People's Party



The SVP is collecting signatures for an initiative to reduce premiums, with a view to improving transparency and eradicating monopolies. The explosion in costs must be effectively addressed. To finance the AHV, the SVP supports the use of gold reserves which are no longer required by the National Bank.

The problem is clearly the increasing strain imposed on the economy and consumers by taxes, levies and charges. Taxes must be reduced to provide the private sector with more disposable income. The state must drastically cut its costs.

How do you intend to improve the integration of foreigners in Switzerland? How do you think asylum abuse should be handled?

Language is the key to integration. Learning a national language must be obligatory, and language courses must be made available. Asylum procedures must be streamlined and the repatriation process must be made more efficient. Cooperation with the EU is essential.

We support the increased availability of language courses, voting rights for foreigners who have been here for some time, and moves to facilitate naturalisation. The problem of asylum abuse can only be tackled if access is provided to the job market without the need to go through the asylum process.

The most important factor for integration is the ability to understand and speak one of our national languages. Asylum applicants who do not cooperate with the authorities or indulge in criminal activities have no place here. Asylum applications should be processed within a few weeks, and rejections should be followed through immediately.

The key to integration is to “foster and encourage”. Learning a national language is a must. Abuse of asylum laws must be strictly dealt with. Repatriation options must be improved; we need to increase our international cooperation and agreements with asylum seekers’ countries of origin.

Foreigners who have lived here for a long time should be granted a faster track to naturalisation. Asylum policy can only be successful if we work closely with our EU neighbours. Asylum seekers who divulge their identity must be granted a limited work permit.

More funds for language courses, vocational training and intercultural exchange. Companies who employ non-EU citizens must involve themselves in their integration. The solution to the asylum problem lies in close cooperation with the EU.

Regrettably, the SVP’s asylum initiative has fallen flat. It will continue to support a consistent approach to tackling abuse of the asylum system. It is not the responsibility of the state to integrate foreigners; the motivation must come from those directly affected.

Once the EU is enlarged to the east, do the bilateral agreements still offer the best way of regulating relations with Brussels?

Thanks to this enlargement we are in a position to uphold our bilateral relations. For this reason the Federal Council has submitted for public hearing its mandate to negotiate on an extension of the agreement on free movement of people to the new member states. Long transition periods should be observed.

Unfortunately, the bilateral path is our only option at present. Sooner or later, however, Switzerland will need to join the EU.

Our nation is not yet ready for EU membership. So even after eastern European countries have enlarged the EU, the bilateral agreements still offer the only way.

The FDP wants to strengthen economic and cultural ties with the EU by extending the bilateral agreements to new EU member states. It supports a successful conclusion to the current bilateral negotiations.

The Liberals recommend that the Federal Council sign an association agreement with the EU which will strengthen our economic, political and institutional ties with the EU without constituting a step towards membership.

The SPS has been campaigning for EU membership for 15 years. But right now the majority of the population is against it. We must continue with the bilateral path and revive the discussion on the consequences and advantages of full membership during the coming legislature period.

The alternative to bilateral negotiations is EU membership with the associated higher taxes and interest rates, worse economic conditions, a restriction on people’s rights and the surrendering of currency sovereignty and neutrality. The SVP is unequivocally opposed to EU membership.

How should the growth in private and heavy-goods traffic be kept down on Swiss roads? Are you in favour of a second Gotthard tunnel?

We need more measures (financial incentives) to promote the shift of heavy-goods traffic from road to rail. Before deciding on construction of a second Gotthard tunnel, we need to evaluate the extent to which the Lötschberg-Neat alpine transit rail tunnel could alleviate the strain.

What is needed is preferential treatment of public transport and slow traffic, higher petrol prices, systems to free cities from private traffic, and a shift of heavy-goods traffic from road to rail. We are vehemently opposed to a second Gotthard tunnel.

The EVP is opposed to a second Gotthard road tunnel and supports the shift of road traffic to rail. Road transport places excessive strain on people and the environment.

Mobility is an important growth factor. The FDP supports the construction of a second Gotthard tunnel in order to improve road safety on the North-South axis. The extensive public transport network should be used more frequently as an alternative to private transport.

The LP supports the construction of a second tunnel to supplement the Neat rail tunnel. This will increase safety and enhance the traffic flow, as well as meet the obligations we have entered into at the European level. The LP supports the extension of major highway sections to three lanes per direction.

The priority must be on shifting freight transport from road to rail and promoting public transport in built-up areas. Let’s not waste billions on building a second Gotthard tunnel!

If traffic links are outdated, the economy suffers. People are against any state-imposed restriction on traffic (traffic halving initiative). For a number of years the SVP has supported the construction of a second Gotthard tunnel and an extension of the motorway network.