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Autor: Lenzin, René
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Switzerland in female hands

Economics Minister Doris Leuthard will be President of the Confederation for 2010. As the National Council and Council of States are also presided over by women, Switzerland's three most senior offices will be held by women this year.

By René Lenzin

Doris Leuthard has risen rapidly through the ranks in her political career. She was elected as a Federal Councillor just 10 years after entering Aargau's cantonal parliament. She was elected successor to Joseph Deiss on 14 June 2006 by the Federal Assembly, and she took over the leadership of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs on 1 August of the same year. The 46-year-old Christian Democrat (CVP) is the fifth woman in national government and the youngest President of the Confederation in the past 70 years.

Voters in Aargau first elected Leuthard to the National Council in 1999. Just two years later she became Vice President of the CVP Switzerland, and in 2004 she took over the party leadership. The CVP had previously lost votes constantly and, in December 2003, had to surrender one

of its two Federal Council seats to the Swiss People's Party (SVP). As leader, Leuthard hardly turned the CVP around, but she did manage to stem the loss of votes. Leuthard was a fresh, media-savvy politician looking to put the party back on the road to success with a social-liberal image.

Leuthard had an uneventful start as Economics Minister. But the financial and economic crises, the negative impact of which on Switzerland she (too) long disputed, spelt a more difficult period for her. She had to get a revision of in-deficit unemployment insurance through Parliament at a time of rising unemployment. By pressing for lower import prices and the free trade of agricultural goods, she also incurred the wrath of many farmers. Enraged farmers in French-speaking Switzer-

land threw boots at her last October. Leuthard is regarded as a competent but rather risk-averse politician. The qualified lawyer is married with no children.

The Federal Assembly elected Moritz Leuenberger (63) as Vice President of the Federal Council for 2010. The Social Democrat from Zurich, who was elected to national government in 1995, may become President of the Confederation for the third time in 2011.

After Ruth Dreifuss (1999) and Micheline Calmy-Rey (2007), Doris Leuthard is only the third woman to be elected as President of the Confederation. Women have presided over both chambers of Parliament on a slightly more frequent basis. Women will be in charge of both the National Council and the Council of States in 2010. As Switzerland's most senior-ranking lady, 32-year-old Pascale Bruderer, a Social Democrat from Aargau, will lead the National Council, and Erika Forster, a 65-year-old Free Democrat from St. Gallen, will take charge of the Council of States. This means Switzerland's three most senior offices will be held by women for the first time in the Confederation's history.

Federal government to regulate research on humans

Three proposals will be voted on in a referendum on 7 March: a constitutional article on research on humans, a popular initiative for cantonal animal protection lawyers and an amendment to the calculation of pension fund annuities. By René Lenzin

Research on humans is not currently regulated at federal level. The introduction of a new article in the Federal Constitution and a Research on Humans Act would explicitly give federal government responsibility for the entire field of research on humans in the healthcare sector. The provisions have two objectives: they aim, on the one hand, to protect the dignity and privacy of people involved in research and, on the other, to take into account the freedom of research and the importance of research to healthcare and society. The key principles for research on humans are that the persons concerned receive sufficient information on the research and give their consent, that the risk-benefit ratio for the research is not disproportionate and that the research is relevant and of a high stand-

ard. The National Council approved the constitutional article by 114 votes to 61, and the Council of States by 40 votes to 0.

Through a popular initiative, Swiss Animal Protection is calling for federal government to regulate the legal protection of animals as sentient beings and for the cantons to employ animal protection lawyers. These should aid mistreated animals ex officio in criminal proceedings. The Federal Council and a parliamentary majority rejected the initiative on the grounds that current legislation is sufficient and the cantons are already able to appoint animal lawyers voluntarily. The National Council opposed the proposal by 130 votes to 50, and the Council of States by 30 votes to 6.

As the second pillar of Swiss old-age pension provision, the pension funds operate on the basis of the funding principle. The constituted capital is converted into the annual annuity using the so-called conversion factor. This factor was already reduced from 7.2% to 6.8% under the first revision of the Pension Funds Act, making the annual annuity CHF 6,800 instead of CHF 7,200 for every CHF 100,000 in capital. Now, before the transitional period for this change has even ended, the Federal Council and a parliamentary majority are proposing a further reduction of the conversion factor to 6.4%. Their aim with this is to address the aging of society and lower anticipated returns on savings capital. The left and the trade unions called a referendum in opposition to the proposal. They are not against the reduction in principle, but consider it to be premature and are calling for higher contributions to prevent pension cuts. The National Council approved the proposal by 126 votes to 62, and the Council of States by 35 votes to 1.