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Poor colleagues

RARELY HAS NATIONAL GOVERNMENT come in for such sustained and intense criticism as in the current legislative period. The way the Federal Council handled the Libya debacle, the UBS affair and the tax row with Germany underlines the fact that the institution no longer operates as a collegial body, but is instead made up of individuals striving to outdo one another.

The retirements of Federal Councillors Leuenberger and Merz, initially intended to be staggered, were also exasperating. It once again became evident that national government is no longer working as a team. Only after pressure was exerted by Parliament, the parties and the media did Leuenberger change his stance and declare himself willing to stand down from office at the same time as Merz to avoid the uncouth individual departure. Parliament would otherwise have spent practically the entire autumn dealing just with Federal Council elections and would have had to postpone other urgent business.

It is understandable that members of the Federal Council will hold different viewpoints and may not see eye to eye with one another on a personal level as well. Even on the Federal Council, people cannot choose their work colleagues. However, all Swiss politicians know that the Federal Council is a collegial body and has to work as a team. Anyone not prepared to work with colleagues as part of a team should not put themselves forward.

The media is also partly to blame for ensuring the Federal Council no longer appears to be unified. As so much emphasis is put on personalities, we only ever read and hear about "Maurer's department" and "Leuthard's department". The media writes about Finance Minister Merz and Foreign Minister Calmy-Rey as though individual members of the Federal Council could determine policy themselves. The fact that policy must be approved by the entire institution is overlooked. It is not actually Interior Minister Burkharter who is responsible for another increase in health insurance premiums, but the Federal Council majority.



Heinz Eckert

Perhaps the Federal Councillors themselves are no longer aware of how the Swiss system of government works. What else could explain the Federal Council not being fully informed of the actions of individual members, or explain three Federal Councillors voicing different opinions on an official statement in various Sunday newspapers after a meeting?

There is much talk about government reform. However, the problem is not the collegial system, but orchestrated vanity. Federal Council members employ whole teams of personal staff and PR and media experts in their departments whose perpetual task it is to present the head in the best light at all times.

The election of Federal Councillors not looking to hog the limelight and appear on the world stage, but instead who see their primary role as duty-bound officials, old-fashioned though that may be, would be far better than any government reform. A collegial body of this kind made up of equal Federal Councillors would then be capable of protecting the interests of the nation and the people in line with its constitutional mandate without losing sight of the future.

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Ski racer Lara Gut (Keystone)

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