

Federal Council elections : Sommaruga and Schneider-Ammann elected to the Federal Council

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Sommaruga and Schneider-Ammann elected to the Federal Council

The Bernese Member of the Council of States Simonetta Sommaruga will replace Moritz Leuenberger, while the Bernese National Councillor Johann Schneider-Ammann will succeed Hans-Rudolf Merz. This means that the favourites triumphed against internal and external competition in both by-elections. For the first time, the Swiss government has a female majority. By René Lenzin

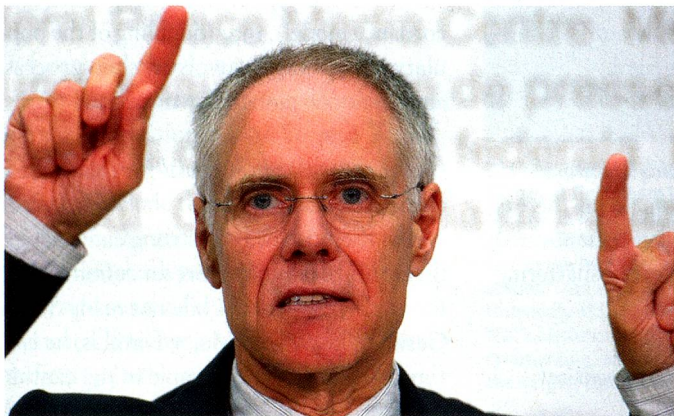
The Social Democrats (SP) and the Free Democrat-Liberals (FDP) each gained two seats in the Federal Council by-elections on 22 September. The SP's candidates Sommaruga and Zurich-based National Councillor Jacqueline Fehr and the FDP's candidates Schneider-Ammann and St. Gallen Cantonal Council Member Karin Keller-Sutter presented Parliament with a slate of four people whose suitability for the Federal Council was widely acknowledged. That neither party could be sure that their candidates would be elected in advance of the poll was less a question of the quality of the candi-

dates than one of the generally tense political climate.

Finally, however, both camps' favourites emerged victorious without too many jitters along the way. Both candidates were in the lead by the time the second vote was held. Sommaruga managed to seal her victory in the fourth round with 159 votes, while Schneider-Ammann required one more round to secure an absolute majority, with 144 votes.

The election of Sommaruga and Schneider-Ammann represents the first time that two representatives from the Canton of Berne have sat in the Federal Government

simultaneously, but the biggest change is that women are in the majority for the first time ever, with four out of the seven Federal Councillors. Nearly 40 years after the introduction of female suffrage and 26 years after the election of the first female Federal Councillor, the Zurich-based Free Democrat Elisabeth Kopp, this represents a further milestone on the path to the political equality of the sexes. And this in a year in which women occupy the Federal Presidency (Doris Leuthard) and the Presidencies of the National Council (Pascale Bruderer) and the Council of States (Erika Forster).

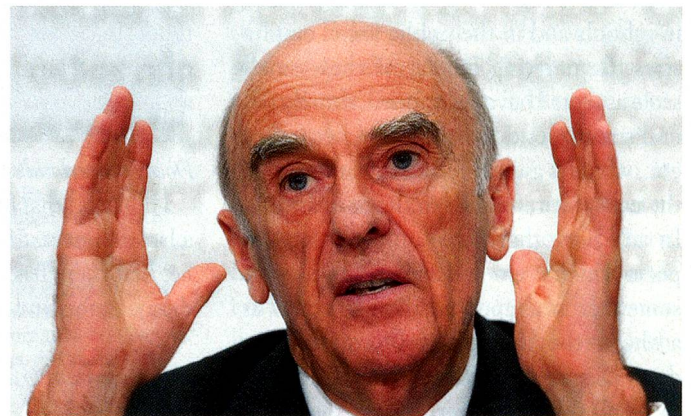


STEPPING DOWN: MORITZ LEUENBERGER

64-year-old Moritz Leuenberger, the longest serving member of the Federal Council, is stepping down. The Social Democrat from Zurich was elected to national government in September 1995 as an advocate of a sophisticated, open Switzerland. He was Minister of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications for his entire term in office. His main achievements include the transport agreement with the EU, which played a key role in shifting the transportation of goods from road onto rail, and the introduction of an incentive tax on fossil fuels. Leuenberger gained a reputation for eloquent and humorous speeches which have been published in anthologies. Leuenberger's political admirers saw him as tenacious and hard-working and as a consensus politician. His critics said that he seemed increasingly tired of the job, particularly in recent years, and highlighted his reticence to tackle difficult issues.

Leuenberger represented the canton of Zurich in the National Council from 1979 to 1995. He was chair of the parliamentary investigation committee that uncovered the so-called "Fichen" scandal at the end of the 1980s. Before becoming a Federal Councillor, he was Minister for Justice and the Police in Zurich for four years.

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STEPPING DOWN: HANS-RUDOLF MERZ

After seven years as Finance Minister, Hans-Rudolf Merz has stepped down from national government. Opinion is divided on his track record. This Free Democrat politician resolutely continued the consolidation of federal finances initiated by his predecessor, Kaspar Villiger, reduced a 20-billion-franc deficit and even managed to balance the books in the most severe economic downturn of the post-war era. However, he was also at the centre of various controversies over the years. Parliament believes he procrastinated too much in responding to the serious problems facing UBS in the USA and that he concealed the true extent of this situation from his government colleagues for too long. His single-handed attempt as President of the Swiss Confederation to secure the release of the two Swiss hostages in Libya proved unsuccessful. And Switzerland ultimately had to soften its stance on banking confidentiality despite Merz still describing it as "non-negotiable" until the very last minute. Merz, who celebrates his 68th birthday in November, represented the canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden in the Council of States from 1997 to 2003. Parliament elected him to the Federal Council at the end of 2003. He suffered a heart attack in autumn 2008, but was back in the office six weeks later.

RL

The voting for the new members of the government, while eventually producing a clear result, was preceded by theatrics concerning the timetable and polemics on the subject of concordance. Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger was the first to announce his resignation for the end of the year, which would have led to a by-election in the winter session. Only a few weeks later, Hans-Rudolf Merz also announced that he was to resign, without prior discussion with Leuenberger and in mid October, which meant that a successor needed to be chosen in the autumn session. Only after a considerable period of to-ing and fro-ing and pressure put on his party, the SP, did Leuenberger bring his resignation forward, which allowed the elections for a replacement to be held simultaneously.

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Greens also entered the fray, citing concordance, i.e. the proportional representation

of all the major parties in the Federal Council, as their reason. The SVP initially demanded a second seat from the SP, then from the FDP, while the Greens focused solely on a second seat from the Free Democrat-Liberals. It soon became apparent that neither of the spoiler candidates had any hope of victory. The Green National Councillor Brigit Wyss failed to even get the backing of the entire red-green camp. Thanks to rigid discipline within the ranks of the SVP, its candidate, National Councillor Jean-François Rime, managed to get to the final stage in both votes, and in both managed to overtake one of the official candidates.

The question of adequate representation in the Federal Council is one that will come up again in time for the federal elections in autumn, if not before. If the SVP can maintain its share of the vote at nearly 30 percent, or even extend it, it will assert its perceived right to a second seat even more vigorously.

While Parliament did elect the Grisons Cantonal Council Member Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf as a second SVP representative in December 2007 as a replacement for Christoph Blocher, she was subsequently expelled from the party.

Sommaruga and Schneider-Ammann will take up office at the end of October. The Federal Council used the elections for two new cabinet ministers to carry out a reshuffle. Doris Leuthard will take over from Moritz Leuenberger at the Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications, and Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf will succeed Hans-Rudolf Merz as Finance Minister. Simonetta Sommaruga will take over from Widmer-Schlumpf at the Department of Justice and Police, while Johann Schneider-Ammann will replace Leuthard as Economics Minister.



NEWLY ELECTED: SIMONETTA SOMMARUGA

Simonetta Sommaruga, 50, has a reputation as a clever tactician and builder of bridges, who for a long time seemed to attract more scepticism from her own party than from the ranks of its political opponents. That was primarily due to the liberal left-wing paper she and some colleagues presented in 2001, in which she questioned traditional left-wing and trade-union positions on immigrants and social issues. After her move from the National Council to the Council of States in 2003, she was able to reconcile herself to her fellow Social Democrats to a considerable extent. Her firm grasp of her portfolio and her business-like manner helped her to score a number of points for herself and the SP and she deftly avoided public disagreements with her party colleagues.

Raised in Aargau, Sommaruga trained as a concert pianist in Lucerne. After breaking off her language studies in Fribourg, she was managing director of the Swiss Consumer Protection Foundation (SKS) from 1993 to 1999, chairing the organisation from 2000 onwards. She was a councillor in the Bernese suburb of Köniz between 1997 and 2005 and was elected to the National Council in 1999. Sommaruga is married to the author Lukas Hartmann. RL

NEWLY ELECTED: JOHANN SCHNEIDER-AMMANN

The election of the 58-year-old Bernese Johann N. Schneider-Ammann has put a businessman into the Federal Council for the first time since the deselection of Christoph Blocher. Schneider-Ammann is a classical proponent of commerce who has always distanced himself from the salary and bonus excesses of the banks. Despite being a stout defender of business interests, he is seen as a responsible employer and defender of the social partnership.

Prior to his election to the Federal Council, he chaired the Association of Machinery and Tool Manufacturers and was a member of the Board of Directors of Economiesuisse. He has represented Berne in the National Council as a Free Democrat since 1999. The demands of his professional career meant that his political activities were largely confined to economic topics.

After studying electrical engineering at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, Schneider-Ammann started work at his father-in-law's machinery factory in Langenthal. He took over the management of the company in 1984 and has been Chairman and Delegate of the Board of Directors of Ammann Group Holding AG since 1990. The company currently employs 1,250 people in Switzerland and 1,750 abroad. Schneider-Ammann is married with a son and daughter. RL