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“Between an inferiority complex and delusions of grandeur”

Switzerland is faced with a major problem. It must find a way of introducing urgently needed reforms while at the same time maintaining its identity, explains Georg Kohler, a professor of political philosophy. Christoph Blocher currently remains the dominant figure in Swiss politics, and Kohler sees him as a major player. An interview with Georg Kohler by Barbara Engel and Marc Lettau.

“SWISS REVIEW”: *Political commentators have been saying for quite a while now that the 2011 election campaigns will be the most expensive of all time and dominated much more by polemics than objectivity. Only around three months now remain until the elections. What is your view of the campaigns?*

PROFESSOR GEORG KOHLER: Fears clearly exist over polemics and a lack of objectivity. However, I don't think things have been that bad so far. It is clear though that much has changed in terms of political expression. I believe that Switzerland's traditional political culture has been put in jeopardy.

What are the reasons for this?

Money plays a major role even though this is always contested. If the balance of power is even and stands at around 50:50, winning another one or two percent of the vote then becomes crucial. And this is more often achieved through mobilisation rather than argumentation. Mobilisation requires money, and money is currently distributed very unevenly in Swiss politics. There are people in the nationalist-conservative camp who are willing to spend billions, and we are talking billions, on publicity campaigns and their political objectives.

On the topic of public awareness, one event, Fukushima, has attracted a great deal of attention. Will Fukushima have an impact on the elections or is its effect just short-term?

I anticipate Fukushima having a certain influence on the elections in the autumn. But predicting that is like trying to look into a crystal ball. One thing that does seem clear to me is that the so-called green-liberal movement is a long-term

trend. This movement – essentially middle-class and pro-market but with concerns about the finite nature of resources and consideration for the common good – is now “profiting” from Fukushima. Conversely, Fukushima has proven a setback for the nationalist-conservative camp, which supports nuclear power.

According to the latest polls, what you refer to as a setback has so far only had a minimal impact on popularity with voters.

That's true, but we must not forget that while the nationalist-conservatives have managed to win over 50% of the vote at some referenda, to win more than 30% in elections is very difficult. The fact is that anyone not currently voting for the nationalist-conservatives, in other words for the Swiss People's Party (SVP), is against them. This also means that the presently fragmented centre parties share one thing, a common opponent. Anyone claiming that the nationalist-conservatives have majority support among the people is mistaken. That is only the case in certain areas. On the other hand, I believe the distaste of those who do not vote SVP is growing rapidly.

You mention the fragmented centre. What do you expect from the centre parties?

The middle ground is congested, not because parties have been pushing into the centre from the right or left, but because new movements and parties have emerged. The prospects of the traditional centre parties are varied. Take the CVP, which was ultimately bound together by its religious origins. When you consider its old electoral base, you see that there are strong centrifugal powers at play, with an urban, Christian-socialist faction on one side and a tra-

ditional, rural faction on the other. The FDP is a party that has been in decline for 30 years. It now faces strong competition from the Green Liberals. There is clearly an aversion to this old gentlemen's party. I see the development of the BDP running parallel to this. After all, this is the break-away of the moderate factions of the SVP. It is no surprise that the BDP has emerged in the traditional SVP strongholds of Berne, Grisons and parts of Glarus.

The electorate wants answers about Switzerland's political future but the centre parties' policies are unclear and provide no answers.

The key question is how to preserve the Swiss identity while at the same time introducing changes that jeopardise much of what could be called Swiss basic consensus. There is no easy answer to this. Looking back, the Swiss approach worked extremely well between 1950 and 1990, during the Cold War when we were officially neutral but, of course, protected by NATO. We were highly successful with this policy of systematic schizophrenia.

Has no political party set out a new way forward since then?

It has become evident to many people that many issues are supranational rather than national and must also be resolved at this level. A good example of this is the Swiss army. It still exists but is no longer fit for purpose in its current form. It must urgently join an alliance because the opposition forces have become too powerful. The successful schizophrenia between the picture portrayed – the small, autonomous, practically self-sufficient state of Switzerland – and the reality that we are fully integrated into the international context worked until 1990 “under the cover” of the Cold War. After that, the contradiction was laid bare. There is now a need for direction and identity. The parties are

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PROFILE

Georg Kohler studied philosophy and law in Zurich and Basel. He was professor of philosophy at the University of Zurich from 1994 to 2011. He is now a guest professor at Dresden University of Technology. His specialist research field is political philosophy. Kohler lived in Vienna between 1981 and 1991 and in Munich from 1992 to 1994. He has published numerous books including "Scheitert die Schweiz? Eine szenische Befragung" (1998), "Über das Böse, das Glück und andere Rätsel. Zur Kunst des Philosophierens" (2005), and "Bürgertugend und Willensnation. Über den Gemeinsinn und die Schweiz" (2010).

faced with the challenge of finding and explaining a new path. None has yet been successful. And Christoph Blocher and his Swiss People's Party still support Switzerland's perception of itself between 1950 and 1990. This bears no relation to the modern political reality but many people like to hear it and it placates them. And now that the EU finds itself in difficulty, it is being robustly argued that we were on the right track.

Money is currently distributed very unevenly in Swiss politics.

The SVP's electoral campaign portrays a Switzerland facing major external threats. Where do you see the greatest threat or danger to Switzerland?

Switzerland's main threat comes from an inability to undergo reform. However, a look back at history shows that Switzerland has always succeeded in duly reforming or adapting itself in the past. If I were to define Switzerland's psychological state,

I would say that it fluctuates between an inferiority complex and delusions of grandeur. We also have to acknowledge that our sense of unity primarily stems from the fact

that we do not want to belong to anyone else, not to Germany, Austria, France or Italy. This is a relatively precarious unifying force. But we should never forget that the country is held together by the legiti-

mate belief that it is a true democracy. There is unfortunately also an element of schadenfreude in some circles when others are not faring well. This can then be exaggerated – outside states are dangerous and only want our money because they are in such a mess themselves.

And what impact will this psychological state between an inferiority complex and delusions of grandeur have on the forthcoming elections?

I don't think we will see any radical changes, with things moving in a completely new direction. But there are dangerous cracks in the system. Social tensions have arisen as a result of the polarisation strategy – and we do not just have people on the right seeking polarisa-

tion, counterparts have also emerged on the left. Then there is the centre, which has not yet found and organised itself. The current tactics of hyperbole in the fight for votes could result in splits that could jeopardise the concordance system for the long term.

So you believe it is possible that the system of concordance government could collapse after the elections and we could end up with a coalition government and an opposition?

I believe it is possible that concordance could be over for the time being after the elections and that from 2012 we could have a centre-right or centre-left coalition and an opposition. But this would not work well. It could result in a dangerous deadlock situation in view of Switzerland's basic structures with its political institutions and people's rights. But sometimes the only way to learn is by making mistakes. I refer to such situations as "learning catastrophes".

What is the likelihood of this occurring?

If the SVP wins well over 30% of the vote, there is a really big chance. The key issue could then be a personnel one. What should happen to BDP Federal Councilor Evelyne Widmer-Schlumpf? Depending on the decision, either the SP or the SVP would leave the Federal Council. That would really be something.

The centre parties, which like to portray themselves as the advocates of a common-sense approach, would therefore become relatively insignificant?

We are not in a period of clear relationships or clearly changing relationships. We are in a phase of significant upheaval and flux. Amidst all these different forces, it seems to me that one trend or development is clearly on the increase - there is a realisation that a policy of unrestricted exploitation of natural resources will cause us problems. There is also growing support for the view that we cannot continue with a financial system that creates more and more money out of nothing. I have faith, at the end of the day, in mankind's

rationality and in the fact that we are beings capable of learning. The question is whether we can react quickly enough.

You have already said that Switzerland can achieve little alone. How do you see Switzerland's relationship with the EU long-term?

I would firstly like to say that should the EU, which is currently facing major issues, break up, this would cause Switzerland massive problems. We would not be unaffected. If the EU continues to exist, and I assume it will, it is also clear that

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Switzerland's position will become weaker. We can already see this happening. Condemnation and criticism of the EU, such as that recently expressed by our foreign minister, Micheline Calmy-Rey, is completely inappropriate, in my opinion. If we think about it logically, it is obvious that the EU does not need to use any "instruments of torture" against Switzerland. It would be enough for Brussels to do nothing at all. It is a basic fact that we want more from the EU than the other way round. Figuratively speaking, the EU elephant could simply trample on the bilateral approach and then we would really have a problem.

With a coalition government and an opposition, as you have described, wouldn't we inevitably fall into this situation?

I can imagine the great realist Christoph Blocher, if he were leading a centre-right government from the forefront or from behind the scenes, saying: "OK, let's do what has to be done." I deem him totally capable of doing this. However, this would not resolve Switzerland's major issues. The question of reform, involving restrictions on direct democracy, still remains.

You portray Christoph Blocher as the almost all-powerful player in Swiss politics.

All I can say is that Christoph Blocher will have control over the party for as long as he lives. This is obvious and it's a situation that may go on for a few years yet. If he were to disappear as the figurehead, the

strength of the party would immediately be halved. The SVP has all the advantages and disadvantages of a political party heavily dependent on a leader. However, history tells us that a vacuum always appears once a strong political leader with this type of charisma is no longer there. Blocher is irreplaceable. The SVP is held together by Blocher and his money. But let's be clear about it: Blocher is a democrat; there is no other option in the Swiss institutions. It is highly likely that there will be a learning catastrophe in his party after his departure. Blocher therefore poses a much greater danger to his party than to Switzerland.

What impact will current political developments have on Swiss people living abroad?

Abroad, of course, the Swiss like to maintain old clichés about their homeland. However, in my experience, people who move abroad are usually flexible, interested and capable of recognising new circumstances. They are people who support necessary changes to the Swiss system. And many of these Swiss abroad live in European countries and know very well that these countries have not lost their sovereignty to the EU. Anyone claiming that the EU states are just vassals of Brussels is mistaken.

The tone of the election campaigning has become much harsher in recent weeks. An advertisement by the SVP with the title "Ivan S. should be allowed to carry on raping. This is what the left, do-gooders and their experts want." stands out in particular. Do we simply have to get used to this kind of political culture?

Absolutely not. This advertisement is malicious, inaccurate, rabble-rousing and extremely dangerous. We must not continue down this path. However, this is the exception rather than the rule. If this were to occur more regularly then I believe that everyone who values Switzerland's political culture would have to make a stand. Such a brutalisation of tradition should not be accepted lying down.