

Alain Berset must now show stamina

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“The most significant bill of the legislative term”

A referendum on a new financial regime is being held on 4 March.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

This is a crucially important vote and, according to Finance Minister Ueli Maurer, “probably the most important bill of the legislative term”. But for once all political parties are in agreement: the referendum on 4 March concerns the new financial regime from 2021 onwards. Unless this bill is approved, the Swiss Confederation will run out of money. The bill aims to ensure the federal budget can continue to rely on income from direct federal taxes and VAT. The current financial regime expires in 2020.

One of Swiss federalism’s unique traits is that the federal tax system is always only valid for a limited period of time. It is now set to be extended until 2035. The Federal

Council initially wanted to amend the federal financial regime to allow it to levy both taxes without any time limitation. However, there was opposition during the consultation procedure and it is now only set to be extended by 15 years. The main argument is that making the taxes subject to time limits and a referendum puts them on a more legitimate democratic basis.

Direct federal taxes and VAT are federal government’s two main sources of income and make up over 60 % of total federal finances. As the new 2021 financial regime officially requires an amendment to the federal constitution, it must be approved at referendum by the Swiss people as well as the cantons.

Alain Berset must now show stamina

24 September could have provided an early overture to Federal Councillor Alain Berset’s presidential year. However, as the Swiss people rejected the far-reaching pension reform put to them that day, he now has to deal with the controversy over stabilising the old-age pension system during his year as President of the Swiss Confederation.

MARKUS BROTSCHI

Until now Alain Berset had been achieving things more quickly than usual in Swiss politics. The French-speaking Swiss from Belfaux in the canton of Fribourg was elected to the Council of States at the age of 31 and to the Federal Council aged 39. After six years in office it is now his turn to take up the presidency and, at 45, he is still the youngest member of national government by some margin.

With Berset, a new generation of social democratic politicians entered national government in 2010. He represents left-wing politics without ideological undertones and is a great pragmatist and tactician. He cuts a finer figure in a suit and tie than some conservative members of government. Berset, who paid his way as a bar pianist during a gap year in Brazil after sitting his school-leaving exams, has brought dynamism to the Federal Council.

Quick-witted but not aloof

Berset was predestined for the official engagements that are part and parcel of his year as President. He always strikes the right tone, is charming and quick-witted but never aloof. He enjoys meeting the public, is an excellent communicator and is also popular with the younger generation. Pupils from a vocational school who were in the audience of Swiss television’s “Arena” show on pension reform swarmed around the federal councillor for a selfie after the broadcast.

The French-speaking native of Fribourg is equally comfortable on the international and domestic stage, whether it is the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, the Locarno Film Festival or, as in 2017, the Swiss yodelling festival. Visits to the WEF and the Winter Olympic Games in South Korea are scheduled for the presidential year. He will also receive the heads of government from the German-speaking countries for a joint meeting in Switzerland.

In Switzerland, the President remains head of his department first and foremost. Here Berset faces two issues which need to be dealt with urgently – health insurance and the old-age pension system. After his election six years ago, the crucially important Federal Department of Home Affairs was returned to SP hands after two Free Democrat federal councillors had spent nine years grappling with rising health insurance premiums and the fallout of demographic change. Berset has proven himself a resourceful head of department with great drive who wants to tackle reform head-on rather than procrastinating. His ambitious plan entailed the simultaneous reform of the first and second pillars and he almost succeeded in pulling it off. If he had he would have created history. However, he failed to break the 20-year deadlock over old-age pension after falling short by a few percentage points and being unable to secure the support of the majority of the cantons on 24 September 2017.

Facing the reality of Swiss politics on the ground

After the failed attempt at pension reform, Berset now faces the reality of Swiss politics on the ground where grand schemes rarely come off and success requires painstaking detail. The former top middle-distance runner, who specialised in the 800 metres, now has to show the stamina of a long-distance athlete to get the new proposal for urgently needed pension reform on track and to push it through Parliament and a referendum.

He may sometimes wish that he could have moved across to the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs after Didier Burkhalter’s retirement. He certainly has the profile required as he once successfully completed the selection procedure for training in the diplomatic corps. But Berset’s party would never have forgiven him for handing over control of social policy to Ignazio Cassis, the new FDP federal councillor.

Right-wing MPs will have been delighted by Berset’s referendum defeat not just due to their views on the issue itself but also because Berset is one of the strongest figures on the Federal Council. When Cassis was asked about the social democrat two years ago, the former leader of the FDP parliamentary group replied: “He is a damned good federal councillor, which is unfortunate for conservative politicians.” The state plays a key role in Berset’s politics but he is certainly no “left-wing ideologist”.

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