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Sommaruga finds her calling

The new president of the Swiss Confederation, Simonetta Sommaruga, seems to be in her element since moving to the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications. The SP Federal Councillor has put climate and environmental policies at the very top of her agenda.

STEFAN BÜHLER

Simonetta Sommaruga likes to wander barefoot around her garden – as the journalists of “Schweizer Illustrierte” learned to their bemusement while visiting the SP politician at her home near Berne in summer 2012. Sommaruga talked about her selection of flowers, plucked some lettuce leaves and presented her various fruit bushes and trees – apples, pears, cherries, plums, blackcurrants, etc. The article was less of a typical “through the keyhole” feature, and more a profile of the nature-loving federal councillor enjoying the sound of bees in her garden.

However, Sommaruga was head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP) at the time – a position that had precious little to do with gardening or any love of the natural world. And little to do with the politician herself. Sommaruga, a trained concert pianist, reluctantly inherited the FDJP portfolio after her election to the Federal Council in 2010. She was like a fish out of water at first. Admittedly, she still got to promote issues that were important to her – such as wage equality, better protection for women against violence, and the concept of “marriage for all”.

However, it would be fair to say that the left-wing politician did the FDJP job through gritted teeth, given that her core responsibilities included tightening Switzerland’s asylum laws and organising the deportation of foreign offenders. Sommaruga had to hold out for eight years before she got the chance to

change ministries. Following the resignation of CVP Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard, the top post at the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC) finally became free on 1 January 2019. With no one to hold her back this time, Sommaruga seized her opportunity.

Back to her political roots

It was a liberation – that was obvious when she smiled before the media after clinching the move, looking to all intents and purposes as if she had just won an election. The new head of DETEC explained that she was returning to her political roots. Not only had she been on the environment committee in her capacity as National Councillor and later as member of the Council of States for the canton of Berne, but she had continued to keep a close eye on environmental affairs as Federal Councillor. In her view, DETEC laid down a marker that was “crucial for our children and grandchildren”. Sommaruga was positively chomping at the bit.

And, right from the off, she convinced the Federal Council during her first year in office that Switzerland should be carbon-neutral by 2050. She won majority support for her green levy on air travel and insisted, for example, that federal employees travel to neighbouring countries by train instead of plane in future, whenever possible. Circumstances certainly also played into Sommaruga’s hands when she started her new job: students launched

school strikes for the climate at the end of 2018, just before she moved to DETEC. They organised demonstrations and appeared alongside Swede Greta Thunberg at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos. Climate change later became the key issue during the election year. Sommaruga, who incidentally had urged the Federal Council to take cli-

Federal Council without Greens

After their success in the 2019 election, the Green Party immediately requested a seat in the Federal Council. The composition of this, the seven-member government, is built on a consensual model representing the main parliamentary parties more or less proportionally. The Greens complained that the FDP in particular was over-represented with two seats. With a 13.2 per cent voting share in the National Council elections, the Greens are now on an equal footing with the FDP (15.1 per cent) and the CVP (11.4 per cent). However, the centre-right parties said that one unprecedented result was no reason for changing the “magic formula” (currently two seats each for the SVP, FDP and SP, and one seat for the CVP). The Federal Council election on 11 December 2019 turned into a red-green attack on FDP Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis, framed mainly as a no-confidence vote. Cassis was consequently re-elected with the lowest score. The results: Viola Amherd, CVP, 218 votes; Alain Berset, SP, 214; Ueli Maurer, SVP, 213; Simonetta Sommaruga, President of the Confederation, SP, 192; Guy Parmelin, SVP, 191; Karin Keller-Sutter, FDP, 169; Ignazio Cassis, FDP, 145.

(MUL)



Red amid verdant green – both colours mean something to Environment Minister Simonetta Sommaruga.
Archive photo: Charly Hug

mate action while she was still a member of the Council of States in 2006, proved adept at turning this to her advantage. Soon the new environment minister was inviting young activists into her office. She also took to the streets in September as tens of thousands walked through Berne to call for concrete action on climate change – this was also a good party-political opportunity before the federal elections.

Change in priorities

And yet, the Greens celebrated an historic election victory while the SP haemorrhaged votes. Sommaruga now has high expectations to live up to within her party, who see her as their green totem. This has implications on how she manages DETEC.

Christian Democrat Leuthard focused on infrastructure from the outset, ensuring long-term funding for road and rail connections. During her time in office, the second Gotthard road tunnel got the go-ahead. The Federal Office for the Environment, on the other hand, played a secondary role, usually only making headlines in relation to wolves and bears. Unlike her predecessor, Sommaruga is positioning herself much more as an environment minister. For her, energy and transport policy is not just a matter of infrastructure or supply security but has just as much to do with the climate. She has added input to issues such as agricultural policy, the protection of drinking water and the use of herbicides and insecticides, while biodiversity conservation is at the very top of her agenda. And she

has interpreted her role this year as president of the Swiss Confederation in the same way. Speaking to the assembled business, political and academic elite at the WEF in Davos in January, Sommaruga made a dramatic appeal for more action on climate change. “The world is on fire,” she told participants, before presenting a video about the decline in bees and biodiversity. Make no mistake, the environment minister means business. For the sake of the bees in her garden – and elsewhere.

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