

President of the Confederation for 1994 : Otto Stich - quiet strength

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President of the Confederation for 1994

Otto Stich – quiet strength

At the age of 67, in his eleventh year as Minister of Finance, Otto Stich is today undoubtedly at the height of his political career. According to opinion polls, he is one of the more popular Swiss ministers, in second or third place – although it should be said that the Federal Council has only seven members. The new president's relative popularity requires some explanation,

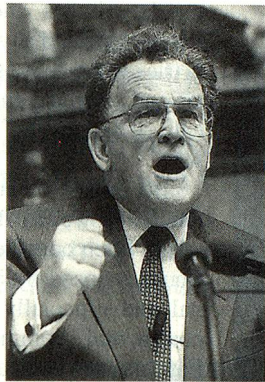
Pierre-André Tschanz

since not so very long ago he was at the bottom of the ministerial ratings. Eloquence does not come easily to him, and he is not the type to court the media to make sure he is mentioned every day – as was Berne's Adolf Ogi, last year's president of the Confederation. Otto Stich is the archetype of quiet strength.

An untiring worker

But this after all is a quality ready-made to please the Swiss, who are traditionally allergic to political showmanship. He is an untiring worker, and he is seldom seen without his briefcase overflowing with papers. His perseverance – critics prefer to call it obstinacy – excites admiration amongst his political enemies as well as his friends. Most Swiss think that personal characteristics such as these are becoming to a politician: especially a socialist, a minority member of a centre-right dominated government.

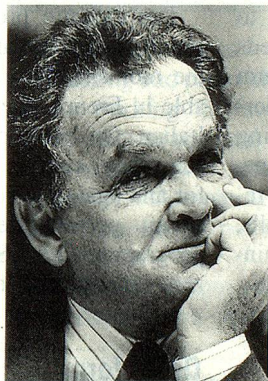
Otto Stich's rise in the Swiss popularity stakes also owes much to the climate of uncertainty pervading Switzerland today – after three years of economic recession, a 5% unemployment rate, towering budget deficits, loss of confidence in political institutions and problems of cohabitation amongst the various linguistic cultures. The "old man" – Otto Stich is the oldest of the seven members of the government – seems like a sure refuge in troubled times in the eyes of many Swiss citizens; and they are certainly right to regard him as a man of unswerving constancy.



Dogged,

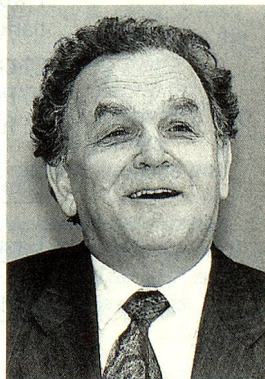


determined,



highly successful

and a popular favourite: Otto Stich, President of Switzerland for 1994 (Photos: RDZ)



This quiet strength, this loyalty, this diligence have enabled the new president of Switzerland to chalk up an impressive list of triumphs in referendums: like last November's Yes to value-added tax with an increase in the total rate; like the rise of 22 centimes in the price of petrol eight months previously; like Switzerland's membership of the Bretton Woods institutions in May 1992. This is a remarkable success rate at the hands of voters. It has perhaps been forgotten that ten years ago this former member of the Lower House of the Swiss parliament, modest enough it is true, barred the way against the first ever woman candidate for Federal Council membership – the Federal Assembly having preferred outsider Otto Stich to the official candidate of the Socialist group, Mrs. Lilian Uchtenhagen, then a member of parliament for Zurich. This earned him the anger and sarcasm of his "comrades", and in the aftermath of his election he was boycotted for many a long day by his own party.

The spirit of pragmatism also led Otto Stich to be more reticent in his views, in comparison with his government colleagues, on the European question. His scepticism and critical attitude to institutions conceived in haste by technocrats and politicians seems to have been much appreciated by Swiss voters. For in December 1992 they delivered a verdict that European integration was going too quickly by deciding that Switzerland should stand aside from the European Economic Area.

Otto Stich is a real man of the people – with his qualities (integrity, realism, constancy, simplicity, diligence) and his defects (lack of charisma, stubborn nature, discomfort with national languages other than his own). So here we have it. After the extrovert Ogi, the introvert Stich becomes president of Switzerland. This office – which he now holds for the second time – will certainly not stop him from downing a glass of wine with his friends and having a friendly game of cards at the old "Volkshaus" in Berne. ■