20 Years of "Magic Formula" in Swiss Government

The last quarter of 1979, besides marking the end of the 40th and the beginning of the 41st legislative period, also ushered in a less conspicuous but nonetheless noteworthy date in the calendar: the 20th anniversary of a peculiar Swiss mode of government composition. We are talking about the "magic formula", according to which the seven seats on the Federal Council, the national executive, are distributed among the four major parties. The pattern observed since 1959 reserves two cabinet posts for the Radicals, two for the Christian Democrats, two for the Social Democrats and one for the agrarian Swiss People's Party. The four political parties together occupy nearly 85 per cent of all seats in the two Houses of the legislature. One may therefore be tempted to interpret the magic formula as a maxi-coalition. Yet, in the Swiss political landscape, which has virtually no parallel elsewhere, it is generally unsafe to operate with labels taken from other contexts. The magic formula is a result of typical Swiss consensus politics based on a common agreement for maximum participation rather than a dialectical process between the leading group and its opposition. It can hardly be called a coalition, since there is no formal pact between the participating organisations, because each of them may or may not back any cabinet proposal put to the House, without provoking a government crisis. Accordingly the federal councillors do not formally represent their respective parties; they are elected by the parliament as a whole, sometimes even against official party proposals.

In order to understand this fully one has to recall some of the basic features of Swiss government. The Federal Council comprises seven members of basically equal status. They are chosen for a period of four years, and each year the legislature appoints the most senior member (customarily) for a one-year term, non-renewable, as the cabinet's chairman, which amounts to the titular role of Head of State. The President of the Confederation, as he is then called, has only formal powers – besides some very narrow emergency powers – over his cabinet colleagues. He acts as a "primus inter pares", remaining in essence an ordinary minister with his portfolio. The overall responsibility of government is shared by the cabinet as a body – what may be termed the "collegial system".

Berne, The Houses of Parliament

All this is prescribed by the constitution, so that there is no room for alternations by mere political decision. An attempt to – for instance – increase the number of cabinet posts from seven to nine or eleven would have to be carried out by constitutional amendment and sanctioned via the popular referendum. Mere suggestions to that effect have had no result so far, mostly because of the Federal Council's own argument that the system of collective leadership across a major section of the party spectrum requires a high degree of intimacy among the ministerial colleagues, who must avoid publicly manifesting personal differences of view. One may find it remarkable that in this all-encompassing cabinet intimacy can be presumed at all. In any case, small is beautiful – for the Swiss government's own purposes.

Only very definite historical and political circumstances could have led to such a tradition of shared government. At the moment of the modern Swiss state's birth – 1848 – and during the first four decades after it things were quite different, perhaps a little more familiar to readers acquainted with the Westminster system. Birth, as usual, was not painless, as in fact a Catholic-Conservative reaction against the proposed transfer of some substan-

tial parts of cantonal sovereignty to federal institutions had to be silenced by military means. This short war, known as the "Sonderbundskrieg", was to be for Switzerland the last violent mark of the hereditary feud between Protestants and Catholics. The latter were now relegated to the position of the losing political opponent, identified also with staunchly federalist attitudes as against the near centralist credo of the Radicals. Accordingly, the idea of shared government in the young Confederation was unthinkable for the time being. Early cabinets were definitely "monocolore", and in parliament the roles of leadership and opposition could be clearly distinguished. At the time Switzerland elected by majority vote, as it is known in the UK and many other democracies. The system effectively barred access to parliament for Catholics in predominantly Protestant Cantons. It led to large Protestant majorities in the National Council, where the people are represented, but to a strong minority position for the Catholics in the Council of States, since the predominantly Catholic Cantons amount to nearly half of the Confederation's members. Catholic-Conservativism therefore remained an important force in Swiss politics representing, as it does, a major area in the very heart of the country.

4

A turning point was reached in 1874 with a total revision of the Constitution. It introduced what Swiss domestic politics are now most widely noted for abroad: the popular referendum. The effect of this innovation was a marked shift of importance from parliament to the electorate, which henceforth had the last word in any legislative process of general significance. As a consequence, governmental and parliamentary work could no longer be carried out by simple partisan majority but had to be put on a broader foundation, likely to win nationwide support on any single issue. Nearly paralled to this institutional shift a change among the political forces began to manifest itself with the appearance of socialism. Gaining ground in Switzerland somewhat later than in more industrialised neighbouring countries, the workers' movements experienced a considerable upsurge during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and a new type of political polarisation came into existence: that based on occupational differences. Apart from their revolutionary views on how the country should be run economically, the various Socialist and Marxist groupings shocked the bourgeois establishment by their opposition to military defence, which was seen by the latter as a particularly grave breach of national traditions.

In 1891 these developments led the numerically still predominant Radical Party to seek a compromise with their former foe, the Catholic-Conservatives, and allow them one seat in the cabinet. The centuries old rift between Catholicism and Protestantism in Switzerland had meanwhile narrowed enough for common leadership to be considered, whilst the new rift between workers and bourgeois gradually widened.

Thirty years later, in 1919, the proportional election system was introduced. This altered the political scenery considerably. Most important of all, the Radicals lost their hitherto customary absolute majority in both Houses, still remaining the largest single party. A further opening for the Catholic-Conservatives now became inevitable and a second seat in the cabinet of seven was subsequently allotted to them.

After another decade, in 1929, the newly-formed agrarian Swiss People's Party – then known as Bauern-Gewerbe- und Bürgerpartei – had become strong enough to gain a post in the Federal Council. Its **success was being formed to a large** extent on ground formerly held by the Radicals. Finally in 1943, that is to say during the critical war years, socialism could no longer be excluded from participation in government under the Swiss consensus system, as co-operation of all major political forces was now badly needed. The by then matured Swiss Social Democrats had meanwhile abandoned their former anti-defence posture. Thus, the present governmental alliance between Radicals, Christian Democrats (formerly known as Catholic-Conservatives), Social Democrats and the Swiss People's Party was finally formed as far as the participants were concerned, although it was another 16 years before – in 1959 – the formula of 2 – 2 – 2 – 1 emerged. From then on for the next 20 years this formula has generally been held to do justice to the peculiar realities of Swiss politics to such a degree that it was given the epithet "magic". At the time of writing this article – just after the Federal Elections of Autumn 1979 – all indications point to the possibility of a long future lying ahead for the magic formula.

In the historical context this achievement, which is entirely born of parliamentary custom and has no legal foundation, expresses the balanced state of the pluralistic society in Switzerland. By conceding equal executive influence to the three major historical parties, the Swiss have evolved a fair compromise between the main streams of social forces within the country; at the same time they have shown their respect and consideration for the agrarian community. Whereas the last century finally defused the historical antagonism between the two Christian denominations and between Federalists and Centralists, it was left to our present century, and especially the decade following the Second World War, to reach political settlement between the social classes. In this latter sense, the magic formula marks the end of a bloodless social revolution which brought Switzerland from its former state of unsophisticated radical liberalism to the modern level of social awareness and organised welfare within a still essentially liberal society.

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