

N°6

EXCERPT

ABSTRACT

IDEAS, FACTS AND FICTIONS

WHAT REMAINS

A homage to the enduring



And other stories

*about light wave communication, clothing that
cleans up air pollution and the canine C.S.I.*

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RENEWAL DEPENDS ON TRADITION

*An interview with Doris Leuthard,
member of the Swiss Federal Council*

By and large, the world remains the same – and Swiss Federal Council member Doris Leuthard suspects it will keep its predictability, too. Nevertheless, Switzerland has to reposition itself to keep up with international competition. She talks about the role of tradition, social intelligence and the childhood memories of tomorrow.

The whole world seems to be undergoing radical transformation: the euro crisis, the multipolar distribution of power, revolutionised energy policies and democratic movements in Africa. Have we reached a fundamental turning point?

No. The crisis doesn't surprise me, these are long-term developments that have been accelerated by the recent finance and debt crises. Short-term occurrences rarely bring changes that were not already on the horizon. In politics, at least. There is a different pattern in technology, where the big, path-breaking revolutions happen. The drivers of radical change are engineers, not politicians. For example, who is president in which country is ultimately not that crucial in the scheme of world events.

Are crises necessary as catalysts of change?

It is desirable in politics to steer a course for stable development. Governments want to see a continuous increase in prosperity. There should be no peaks, either upwards or downwards. On the other hand, humans are lazy creatures. They rarely change anything if they don't have to. You see that now in individual European states. The crisis is now making them pay the price for years of living beyond their means.

What will change, what will stay the same?

The balance of power will change. That is not a new phenomenon either, but a continuous process over decades. The new self-confidence of emerging states and their demand for more power and influence has arrived five to ten years sooner than expected with the latest crises, but there would have been no stopping it in any case. At the same time, rapid globalisation and the increasing movement of goods around the entire world are leading to changes and huge environmental costs that could make people revert to local interests. What will not change is the number of conflicts in the world. The reasons may change, the conflicts may shift regionally, the use of force will rise or fall. However, conflicts are part of humanity and will probably always be with us.

Switzerland's political system is thought to grind slowly because of the federal structures and direct democracy. Is this acceptable in the long term?

Federalism has a future because it ensures competition among the cantons. Competition is always a driver for re-thinking your own strategy and creating a new one – the basic prerequisites for a country's sustainable growth. In addition to that, we live in a world where everyone is measured against everyone else, as illustrated by the current boom in rankings of universities and consumer products. Direct democracy is not an obsolescent model either. It favours gradual change – change that is supported by the people. Countries where the state has more power are more flexible, because they can react faster to changing circumstances. However, if the people cannot see where the change came from it will stand on shaky foundations.

What should people hold on to, what are the areas for further development?

We should hold on to lifelong learning. The constant that gives us something to cling to in a fast-moving, globalised world is education. It helps us to believe in our own ability to change. People should also hold on to social ties. Particularly in a highly technologised world where we have little time to look one another in the eye, friendship and community become more and more important. People should develop further towards more emotional, communicative intelligence. Education alone has never made anyone into a competent manager. Where different cultures meet, social skills are required. The main thing that counts here, however, is a sincere interest in the other person. That is the only way for us to understand where the Chinese or the Americans are coming from.

And how do we learn social intelligence?

Parents lay the foundations. The rest is the task of each individual – treating what he or she learns in a deliberately critical way and being distinct from the mainstream. Adapting to changing circumstances is important, but the wealth of information and options also demands a critical intellect. That is what the state needs: intelligent citizens with the confidence to challenge.

What will remain of today's Switzerland in 50 years' time?

I don't think a lot will change. Switzerland, and the world as a whole, will by and large stay the same. If you look back fifty years, you will realise that apart from technical progress a very great deal has remained in place. People's basic needs stay the same. Everyone wants work, a home, a family and quality of life. The means of satisfying the basic needs are changing, but that won't make Switzerland a different place.

How much tradition and innovation does a country need to keep up with international competition?

Being distinctive is crucial. If you look at urban development worldwide, in Shanghai and Chicago, for example, it becomes evident that we are moving towards a uniform culture. Everything looks the same. It no longer matters which continent a city is in. That is not desirable. So Switzerland will get along fine with its somewhat traditional attitude of preserving historically grown cities and beautiful natural surroundings. These are features that enable clear distinctions to be drawn between us and other countries.



The Depth of a Valley, 2009
© Ambrosine Allen; <http://ambrosineallen.com>

So in that case, being distinct means going back to tradition, progress means putting everyone and everything on the same level?

A combination of the two is ideal. I recently paid a visit to a large cowshed that held around a hundred cattle – and at the same time was one of the biggest solar energy installations in Switzerland. Highly traditional dairy farming combined with high tech on the roof, that could be the Switzerland of the future. We have to stick to the historically grown structures and values that make up “Swissness,” but organise them more intelligently and modernise them. Modern technology enables us to preserve what has grown up over centuries. Tradition thus becomes the anchor for the positioning of a modern Switzerland in the 21st century.

Nostalgia makes us happy because it shows us where we belong. What would you like to see restored?

Nothing, really. I am happy in the present and as a politician I look to the future. Naturally, everyone has childhood memories. For example, we used to fetch fresh milk from the cheese-making plant in a lidded pail. But today's children will also have happy memories of now. I wish every adult the warm feeling that childhood memories can trigger. The images depend on the era you grow up in. Twenty years on, when you are driving to work in an electric car, you may find yourself dreaming of the noise of big car engines and a phenomenon becomes transfigured that we don't consider desirable even today. Memories also idealise things that weren't that great. But the world is constantly changing for the better.

Interviewers:

Simone Achermann and Stephan Sigrist

As Director of the Swiss Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC), Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard is one of the seven members of the Federal Council, the executive authority of the Swiss Government. Prior to assuming her position as head of DETEC on 1 November 2010, Doris Leuthard was Head of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs (FDEA). In this role, she was responsible for the labour market, vocational education and training, technology, innovation, agriculture, housing, security of economic supplies to Switzerland and foreign trade policy. She has represented Switzerland at institutions including the WTO, OECD, the FAO and the World Bank and been Chairman of the EFTA. In 2010, she was President of the Swiss Confederation. Federal Councillor Leuthard was born in 1963. She read law at the University of Zurich, including studies in Paris and Calgary. She was previously a partner in a law firm.

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