4
Consensus Democracy: The Swiss System of Power-Sharing

4.1 The development of Swiss consensus democracy

In the earlier chapters, we have already mentioned some elements of power-sharing, consociational or consensus democracy which the Swiss call ‘system of concordance’. Its two main characteristics are the following: First, the executive is composed of a grand coalition with the objectives to let participate all important political forces in governmental politics, and to share political responsibilities with all these forces. Secondly, decision-making in a grand coalition implies permanent negotiation and striving for compromise. Power-sharing or consensus democracy is not unique; forms of power-sharing can be found in countries as different as Belgium, the Netherlands, India or South Africa. Power-sharing democracy is a contrasting type to the predominant, Anglo-Saxon model of majoritarian democracy, in which the government is composed of a simple majority, holds all power and imposes its decisions to the minority. I shall come back to this topic in the last chapter. Here, I want to describe the Swiss power-sharing institutions, their development, their functioning, their strong points and weak spots. If you ask the Swiss today why they like power-sharing, a typical answer is: ‘I find it fair that all languages, all regions and political parties are represented in the government. This is better for our country because Switzerland needs political compromise rather than majority decision.’ History tells us, however, that in 1848 the Swiss constitution was partly conceived as a majoritarian democracy. For several decades it was one single party, the radicals, that held power in a majoritarian regime. The development of power-sharing institutions and practice came later. We can distinguish three factors that favoured the institutional conversion of the majoritarian regime into a power-
sharing system. The first one is federalism. The small, mostly Catholic cantons had a veto position in federal decision-making right from the beginning. This forced the ruling radicals to make political compromises. The second one is the introduction of a proportional electoral system in 1918, which was the success of a coalition of Catholic conservatives and social democrats fighting the radical predominance. As a consequence, the radicals lost their majority in parliament, and the party system became fragmented in the following elections. The third and most important element is direct democracy. We have already mentioned that the referendum is a strong incentive, or even a constraint to cooperate in an oversized coalition because otherwise the risk of defeat in the popular vote is too high. This indirect, institutional effect of the referendum is as important as the direct effects in the votes.

4.1.1 The impacts of the referendum on the composition of the government

The reader is reminded of the period following the introduction of the optional referendum in 1874 (see Section 3.3.4.1), when the Catholic conservative minority used the device like a machine gun to shoot down important projects of the radical majority. The latter could see no other possibility than to come to an arrangement with the opposition. To integrate the Catholic minority the radicals offered them a seat in the previously one-party government. The conservatives accepted and from thereon they had a voice in the Federal Council. But this also meant sharing political responsibility for the solutions proposed by the collegiate council. So, behind this ‘amicable agreement’ there was a coercive pressure to cooperate. The radicals saw their large majority in parliament becoming useless if referendum challenges by the Catholic minority were not curbed. On the other hand, the Catholic minority, who were unlikely to obtain a parliamentary majority, could win more through partial cooperation with federal government projects than they could through systematic opposition.

Concern for similar integration of all other important political forces led to wider power-sharing in the Federal Council. The Catholic conservatives negotiated to increase their number of seats. In 1928, the farmers and burghers, who ten years before had split off from the liberal radicals, were reintegrated with a seat in the government. In 1935, the social-democrats became the largest political force in the National Council. Some cities had left-wing majorities. Social-democratic claims for participation in the federal government, however, were turned