

# “Power requires control”

## Political party scientist Hans Herbert von Arnim takes stock – and explains why Switzerland is doing better

by Robert Seidel

*The quarterly votes are a matter of course for the Swiss, they are part of everyday life. They are not only important in terms of content but are also an extremely valuable corrective against political solo efforts, cronyism and megalomania.*

*The German constitutional expert Hans Herbert von Arnim has spent decades investigating the problems in the German party state – and this is also of interest to Swiss readers.*

Since the 1980s, von Arnim has been actively following how the parties have made the German state their prey. Time and again, he has put his finger on the gaping wounds, and now he has taken stock. There is hardly anyone who can demonstrate more expertise than the courageous professor from Speyer. In August, he published another book: “Power requires control. Why we must rethink our democracy. Experiences with 75 years of a party state – views of a quarrelsome democrat.”

Politicians of all colours in the German Bundestag and in the state parliaments agree: If someone exposes their shameless self-serving mentality or their hidden money flows, they are not likely to talk to him and certainly not in public. On this issue, everyone from left to right agrees. It is also clear that the tax-financed public media institutions must toe this political line, as they are intertwined with the political establishment.

### Citizens’ interests versus party careers

In the new publication, tellingly entitled “Macht braucht Kontrolle” (Power requires Control), von Arnim uses his own highly impactful life story to trace the problems of the federal republic’s people’s representatives: office patronage, excessive party financing, “flash laws”, undemocratic election procedures, obstruction of direct democratic decision-making options, occupation of control bodies, circumvention of democratic procedures via the EU, etc. The fact that von Arnim addresses these problems is very unpleasant for all party careerists, and yet it partly

explains the increasing political disillusionment among the German population and the increasing success of new parties such as the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) or the *Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance* (BSW).

Von Arnim paints a picture of a “classe politique” in which many are hardly concerned with their original task, namely, to promote the interests of the people. Instead, they are mainly concerned with their own career planning or work as lobbyists. The reader of the book is reminded of the current resignations in the red-green government.

Claudia Roth, who quickly enforces expensive promotions of party friends, others who still have well-paid positions in state or semi-state institutions ... Yes, even ministers like *A. Baerbock*, *Ch. Lindner* or *S. Schulze* will also have to look for new positions after January 2025, not to mention the many members of the Bundestag from the red-green-yellow coalition, who will almost certainly lose their seats in the next elections. But in his new publication, von Arnim focuses on the ways and mechanisms by which power has been exercised and spread by the parties over the past decades.

After decades of research and work on the representation and implementation of the will of the people in parliaments and governments at the federal and state level, he increasingly concludes that the unchecked expansion of the will to power of the “people’s representatives” must be limited by law or contained or corrected by direct-democratic elements.

It is interesting that almost all parties repeatedly campaign for more citizen participation before upcoming elections. After the elections,



ISBN 978-3-453-20031-9

however, the will quickly fades away. It is not far-fetched to think that professional politicians do everything they can to avoid restricting their own power. The most blatant example of a 180° turn (not a 360° turn!) is that of most Green Party politicians. Originating from grassroots democratic structures in the 1980s, the party has degenerated into a cadre party. Today, the representatives of the Greens outdo each other in their authoritarian approach. Civil rights, participation and self-determination only apply if it fits into their ideology; everything outside of it is “delegitimised”.

Even the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats have so far barely managed to go beyond worn-out declarations of making a commitment to civic participation. As soon as they are in power, their will to implement them comes to a grinding halt. It remains to be seen how the AfD and the BSW develop on this issue.

### **Standing up for the common good**

Arnim’s defence of democracy is to be highly commended. He maintains that parties make a significant contribution to the political will of the people. However, and this is his objection, their power must be restricted again. His great merit is to point out various constructive ways in which German parliamentarism can be saved, including direct-democratic elements.

With his tireless criticism of the excesses of the party state, of the collusion of politics and state offices in administration and justice, and of the electoral process, von Arnim makes a major contribution to improvement. With his criticism, he also provides the understanding needed to bring about constructive change. His

legal actions, including those taken to the Federal Constitutional Court, on the provision of pensions for politicians, their allowances (1975), party financing (1992) or the 5% clause in European elections (2011), are groundbreaking. Von Arnim’s civic engagement is characterised by a strong sense of public service that one could only hope for in all those with political responsibility.

In conclusion, Hans-Herbert von Arnim’s book is not only extremely interesting from a state-theoretical point of view, but also from a historical one – his work spans more than forty years history of the Federal Republic of Germany. And it is also a very biographical book that brings the reader closer to the personality of a courageous person in his development and his life. An upright personality, as one can only wish for in any country.

The opportunity for Swiss citizens to participate in decision-making on substantive issues, to vote on budgets, to elect judges, to elect auditors, to launch referendums and popular initiatives – these are all characteristics of a democracy in which the population can control and participate in decision-making. Under no circumstances should this be undermined by a “tie-up” with the European Union. On the contrary, far-reaching decisions by the Federal Council should be subject to a referendum.

*(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)*

Hans-Herbert von Arnim. *Macht braucht Kontrolle. Warum wir unsere Demokratie neu denken müssen. Erfahrungen mit 75 Jahren Parteienstaat – Ansichten eines streitbaren Demokraten.* Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, Munich 2024. ISBN 978-3-453-20031-9.