

WE ARE ETH – Episode 13

With Julie Cantalou, strategist and politician, Co-Secretary of the Green Liberal Party Switzerland

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[00:00:00] **Julie Cantalou:** I think ETH has a key role to play. So evidence and scientific knowledge that is generated in higher education, institutions such as ETH, has to find its way into the policymaking process so that it can inform policymaking.

[00:00:18] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with Julie Cantalou, who formally worked in the ETH President's office and has remained a friend of ETH Zurich and is now involved in politics and is the Co-secretary General of the Green Liberal Party. Julie, both your parents studied at the ETH and the EPFL, those great Swiss institutions. But they studied architecture. So how did you end up in political science?

[00:00:49] **Julie Cantalou:** Yes indeed. It is a surprise I didn't, become an architect, I guess. Most people were betting on me becoming an architect. I was always at my parents' offices and I was very interested in architecture I was always fascinated by politics and by policies from very early age on I can't remember. I think several topics were particularly fascinating to me, especially foreign affairs, but also topics around research and education policy are key to me and I'm interested in both, the game of politics, how do you convince, how do you sell yourself? How do you get your message to the people? How do you campaign? But I'm also fascinated by how you can shape better policies.

[00:01:36] **Susan Kish:** You're the, as I understand it, the Co-Secretary General of the Green Liberal Party. What does a Co-Secretary General do?

[00:01:44] **Julie Cantalou:** We run the operations of the party. That's basically what we do. My colleague and I manage the party as an organization. Parties are membership driven organizations, so there are several decision-making processes and et cetera, et cetera.

[00:01:58] But we also have a staff of 12 people who work for us. And we run the daily operations of the party, we run the campaigns, we run all these kinds of things. And then the other key role we have is in communicating the policies and stances of the party and the third key role I would say we have is to advise the president and the board on strategic issues. Be spin doctors of the party. Let's put it that way.

[00:02:28] **Susan Kish:** What I'm not hearing though is a lot of fundraising.

[00:02:31] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, no, that's also part of it. I didn't mention it because it's not my favorite part, to be very honest with you. But yeah, the Swiss system again is very different from many other European political systems because in Switzerland we have no public funding for parties.

[00:02:49] **Susan Kish:** No. So, the government doesn't give any money to any of the parties?

[00:02:53] **Julie Cantalou:** No.

[00:02:54] **Susan Kish:** Huh.

[00:02:54] **Julie Cantalou:** The parliamentary groups, they receive some funding to do the parliamentary work, but political parties as such do not receive public funding. Unlike many other European countries. I think the other country I know where it's the case is the UK.

[00:03:08] The UK also does not have public funding for parties but in other European countries it's common to have public funding, and so fundraising is key, indeed.

[00:03:19] **Susan Kish:** So where do you raise your funds from? Is it from individuals, corporations?

[00:03:23] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, both.

[00:03:25] **Susan Kish:** Foundations?

[00:03:26] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, no foundations, very little. No, it's mostly we have a lot of crowd funding.

[00:03:31] **Susan Kish:** PACs? (Political Action Committees)

[00:03:31] **Julie Cantalou:** No, we don't have PACs. Not yet.

[00:03:33] **Susan Kish:** Oh, that's interesting.

[00:03:35] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah. No, not yet. I don't know if this is something that is going to develop, but currently in the Swiss political system, we don't know PACs in the way we know that in the US what there is given that, we do not only run for elections, but we have these public referenda, these plebiscites four times a year we vote on, on different issues in Switzerland.

[00:03:57] **Susan Kish:** Oh. When you get those big packets of background information, these 24-page PDFs with charts and graphs, I remember those.

[00:04:04] **Julie Cantalou:** You remember those, right?

[00:04:05] **Susan Kish:** I do. Because you felt you actually had to read the darn thing, right?

[00:04:10] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah. Because they're complex things you have to vote on, right? Yeah. There we build, I wouldn't call them PACs, but they're coalitions are built between different parties and different organizations, civil society organizations, and they raise funding for a specific topic in favor or against, yeah.

[00:04:29] **Susan Kish:** Got it. If I understand correctly, you studied in Spain and Madrid and Barcelona. You studied in Brussels, you studied the UK. I am sure, given your interest, you also looked at those political systems in those various countries while you were there. What really struck you in terms of the differences in these different European approaches towards democracy?

[00:04:49] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, it struck me how unique the Swiss system is, so I felt confirmed that the Swiss system is really quite different. Because it combines several elements that exist in other countries, like for example, federalism. Similarly to, I don't know, Germany or the US or we have a bicameral system with a Senate and a congress.

[00:05:08] they're not called like that, but we also have two chambers, but then other elements get added to it. The most famous one is probably direct democracy. The fact that we can vote, we have popular votes on nearly anything and everything, and then certainly the fact that we have what in German is called Milizsystem.

[00:05:28] So it's a non-professional or non-professionalized system. People who are elected to public office, be it at the local Canton or national level are not paid a salary. They do that on top of their regular work in most cases.

[00:05:47] **Susan Kish:** Ah, so they really don't have a choice unless they're incredibly wealthy. But to work and do this on the side.

[00:05:54] **Julie Cantalou:** More and more there is a professionalization of the political system, people have jobs in the political sector. But at the local or at the Canton level, people can be dentists or pharmacists or teachers or whatever, and they do that on the side.

[00:06:12] **Susan Kish:** And do you view that as a strength or as a vulnerability?

[00:06:18] **Julie Cantalou:** It has great advantages, like many things. It's not black and white. Things are incredibly complex and the more you know about something, the more you start doubting about your own views. Is it good or is it bad? The big advantage is the fundamental idea behind it is that people are still linked to real life.

[00:06:36] They know what people really care about and what the challenges of people are, right, and they're linked to society and close to people's worries. The convenience clearly is that as the national level it is due to the increasing pace and complexity of policy making and law making it is nearly impossible to uphold a job next to a political career, it's very difficult.

[00:07:04] **Susan Kish:** Because you have to meet with your constituents.

[00:07:06] **Julie Cantalou:** Yes.

[00:07:07] **Susan Kish:** You have to deal with your colleagues, you have to manage campaigns.

[00:07:11] **Julie Cantalou:** And you have to be in commissions. Like most of the law making is made in commissions and there are many conversations going on.

[00:07:18] And also what is very specific to the Swiss Parliament, our parliamentarians do not have staff.

[00:07:23] **Susan Kish:** They don't have staff?

[00:07:24] **Julie Cantalou:** No. They have a small budget to have some support, but they don't have, I don't know, five or six people on staff like it is common for congressmen or senators or like it is the case in the German Bundestag, for example. No.

[00:07:42] **Susan Kish:** So having seen all these different political systems, did you ever question coming back or was it always inevitable for you to come back to Switzerland?

[00:07:51] **Julie Cantalou:** No, it wasn't. Funnily enough, it wasn't. There just came a moment where it was clear that now was the time, but it was not inevitable. I can't really describe it.

[00:08:00] I actually had a political event that really shocked me quite a bit. It was Brexit. I was living in the UK during Brexit and that was a bit of a wakeup call. Oh, this is not the type of political environment I want to work and live in. And then I had been abroad for over 11 years and then came a moment where we were like, okay, let's go home.

[00:08:21] No, it was a great experience. I would do it again, anytime. I think having lived abroad unlike other countries, the Swiss don't go abroad as much as other Europeans.

[00:08:31] **Susan Kish:** I did notice that.

[00:08:33] **Julie Cantalou:** You noticed that too?

[00:08:35] **Susan Kish:** Yeah. It's tough with Switzerland, so Perfect.

[00:08:37] **Julie Cantalou:** That's certainly one part of the answer to this question. The other is, even though Switzerland is great and the quality of life is amazing in Switzerland, there's lots to experience and learn in other countries too.

[00:08:50] **Susan Kish:** Yep.

[00:08:50] **Julie Cantalou:** I enjoyed it so much. It broadened my worldview. It shaped my identity to have lived abroad. Everything I learned there about myself, my own country, about Europe as a continent. It was great. I think too few people in Switzerland go abroad.

[00:09:08] **Susan Kish:** Interesting. I wonder if there's a policy that could address that, in the educational system or...

[00:09:14] **Julie Cantalou:** We used to be, and that's something I really, um, yeah it's such a pity, but we are not participating in Erasmus anymore.

[00:09:21] Erasmus is the Student Exchange Program, Switzerland used to be. I was, I went on Erasmus. I'm a typical representative of this, what we call Erasmus generation. This generation of people who benefited from this program and went abroad. I went to Madrid for example. And now Switzerland doesn't participate in it anymore because it's a European educational program and because of our tense relationship between Switzerland and the EU, we have been excluded from participation at the moment.

[00:09:51] I hope we can rejoin at some point. And that has a huge impact. And I think we won't see the impact now. We might see it only in a few years, but this was one way how young Swiss could go abroad for a certain period of time and get to meet people with different worldviews and different realities and identities and learn languages.

[00:10:14] **Susan Kish:** And it is a part of education as you put it.

[00:10:17] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. All the soft skills that you learn and, you become much more flexible and understanding, yeah. So that's a, it that would be a great policy.

[00:10:26] **Susan Kish:** That would be a great policy. When you came back to Switzerland, you started working at the ETH.

[00:10:33] What exactly was your job? Because the description, which was something like strategic projects or process... strategic development.

[00:10:41] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, strategic development.

[00:10:42] **Susan Kish:** I have no idea what that means. No clue. It sounds impressive though. It sounds really cool.

[00:10:47] **Julie Cantalou:** It was very cool. I loved it. Yeah, the team I was working at and the president's office was a task to support the board, the Schulleitung, so the board of ETH, specifically the president, in developing the ETH short, middle, and long-term strategy. And that goes from teaching to research, to outreach - everything.

[00:11:14] The idea behind it was, ETH is this very decentralized... Actually ETH is like a tiny Switzerland, right? With the departments working like cantons, I like this analogy.

[00:11:23] And and so to, find the common ground and develop a common direction in which ETH goes while respecting all this diversity, that was the real challenge behind that work. And also because ETH is a public university, it's publicly funded to a large extent. ETH has to submit four-year strategic plans to the government. So that was also something very concrete that we had to develop. Yeah.

[00:11:53] **Susan Kish:** You mentioned and described the ETH as a tiny Switzerland. A small exercise of that direct democracy, and yet it plays in the champion league. And that the conflicts that come with that, what is the intersection of ETH and questions of policy.

[00:12:09] Does the ETH have a role in educational policy? How do those worlds intersect?

[00:12:15] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, maybe I have to open a small parenthesis and make a distinction that in the English language you can make unlike in, in German and what I always distinguish between policy for science and science for policy.

[00:12:28] So policy for science is the area where you do research and educational policies. Create the best possible framework and playing level playing field for, higher education to be the best it can be.

[00:12:41] And the other one, which I find even more interesting is what I call science for policy.

[00:12:46] **Susan Kish:** Okay.

[00:12:47] **Julie Cantalou:** And that, to answer to your question I think ETH has a key role to play in that area. So evidence and scientific knowledge that is generated in higher education institutions such at ETH, has to find its way into the policymaking process so that it can inform policymaking, obviously.

[00:13:10] It's obviously not the role of science to make decisions, it's the role of science to inform, which is very different. The decision makers are always the policy makers. Or the people in Switzerland in the end, right?

[00:13:25] **Susan Kish:** While you were at the ETH, you ran for the national Council.

[00:13:30] **Julie Cantalou:** Yep.

[00:13:30] **Susan Kish:** As I understand it you decided you were bored, and you needed a side job?

[00:13:34] **Julie Cantalou:** No. I'm really passionate about politics and I, because I was abroad for such a long time, I was always politically active. I was a member of political parties in the countries I was living in. I was interested following closely, sometimes campaigning, stuff like that.

[00:13:51] But I was never able to run for public office myself. And when I came back five years ago in 2018 in January, it was like, oh, now finally I will be able to run. And yeah, so I took the opportunity and did that and no, I wasn't bored actually.

[00:14:07] I remember it was quite a challenge to manage a campaign and at the same time do good work at ETH. But I remember ETH was great in that sense. They allowed me to reduce, I think for a few months my work time so I could run the campaign.

[00:14:24] **Susan Kish:** And how did you do in the campaign?

[00:14:26] **Julie Cantalou:** I think I did okay. In Switzerland We have a proportional system. You have, uh as many people on the list as you have seats in parliament for the Canton of Zurich because the constituency is the Canton of Zurich. And so that at the time was 35 and I was somewhere on the second half of the List.

[00:14:45] And I was able to move up quite a bit because you can vote individuals on the list. The lists are open. We call them open lists. So I guess that's an indication that I did an okay campaign. I think it was a great experience. I learned a lot about campaigning, because

[00:15:01] **Susan Kish:** That was gonna be my question. Yeah. What did you learn from this? I've always been thinking that it's It's like racing. You have to be able to lose and get yourself back up and go right back and do it again but learn each time.

[00:15:15] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, I think that's a very good analogy. Every campaign is like a race. It is a marathon mostly, you have to start very early with planning and organizing and then you have the time periods a few months before the elections, which is really tough. Yeah, but you learn every time. I really like campaigning, actually. This is something I enjoy, thinking about what are the key messages? How do I communicate those to my target groups? What are my target groups? Why and what do they care about? What is essential to me? What do I want to tell about me and my engagement and my person and then I also like to be out on the street and knock on doors and talk to people Sometimes in winter it's not that fun. . .

[00:16:02] **Susan Kish:** The truth comes out. So in your current election, what are the two or three issues that you really wanna have impact on?

[00:16:13] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah. So we have elections here on the 12th of February. And from my personal point of view, I think they are, there are three key topics that you asked about three, right? So let's try to narrow it down to three key topics. One thing that is very important to know is, Zurich is a motor of Switzerland, right?

[00:16:34] It's the engine it's a bit of an engine of an economic, but also societal cultural engine for Switzerland and and it's a very diverse Canton. You have rural areas, you have the biggest city in Switzerland, which is Zurich at the heart of it, and this is, it's an important election also for Switzerland.

[00:16:54] And I guess the three topics, if I had to narrow it down, is the energy crisis, do we secure our energy supply and that it is renewable. In the short term, but also in the long term, because the war in Ukraine is having an impact on energy supply also everywhere in Europe, including Switzerland.

[00:17:12] And, but at the same time, we don't want to give up renewables. On the contrary, we want to speed up the energy transition so that we can be more independent. more secure and greener. That's basically it. So that's one really key topic people care a lot about.

[00:17:29] The other one is the economy. The Swiss economy and the economy in Zurich is doing really well. But it is true that unemployment is at a two-decade low. It hasn't been as low in two decades.

[00:17:42] **Susan Kish:** Wow.

[00:17:42] **Julie Cantalou:** Meaning that many companies are struggling to recruit actually. And at the same time, we have inflation, not as much as in the US but we do have inflation.

[00:17:53] And the fact that the labor market is dry, let's put it that way, also drives up the salaries and therefore inflation. To continue innovating and reviving the labor market so that we, and maybe have more people entering the labor market so that we can really continue on this really good path we are on.

[00:18:13] It's basically securing the basis for future innovation and growth.

[00:18:18] **Susan Kish:** Okay, so we've got the energy issue, we've got the economic issue. What's number three?

[00:18:22] **Julie Cantalou:** And the third one is education. And I'm not saying that because I'm on the ETH podcast, don't worry. I really believe it. It is the key investment in our future that we can do now. And I'm not talking only higher education, education from zero onwards. One year old, so preschool. Mandatory school and then of course, higher education. We have to continue investing in this.

[00:18:48] We have we have a chronic lack of teaching personnel in Zurich. I'm talking primary and secondary school and yeah, and then also our education system could do better in terms of, giving opportunities for pupils that come from less privileged families, or families that haven't...

[00:19:10] **Susan Kish:** educational equity.

[00:19:11] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah. Exactly. Switzerland isn't doing that well on these indicators and you are much more likely to go to universities if your parents have gone to university. But the difference is really high compared to other European countries. So how can we have an education system that is more geared towards creating opportunities for everyone.

[00:19:34] **Susan Kish:** That's interesting. Especially given that education is effectively free. Higher education.

[00:19:38] That's interesting.

[00:19:39] I was recommended to ask you a question about a picture in the ETH faculty foyer.

[00:19:47] **Julie Cantalou:** Oh, yes.

[00:19:48] **Susan Kish:** Do you know what they are talking about here?

[00:19:50] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, I know what they're talking about. Yeah. It's my grand uncle's picture. The brother of my grandmother. Yeah.

[00:19:55] **Susan Kish:** Really?

[00:19:56] **Julie Cantalou:** He was the first president of the ETH. So the ETH Council. Yeah. When that was created, I don't know the exact year, he became the first president and yeah. He was an amazing guy. A great guy. I have amazing memories of skiing with him when I was a kid.

[00:20:14] And, he always had amazing stories because he was a diplomat and he lived abroad for many years and

[00:20:19] **Susan Kish:** Oh, so he was not an architect?

[00:20:22] **Julie Cantalou:** No, not an architect. Also, somebody from the policy side of things. Exactly. So, he became the first president of ETH and I didn't know that, but I was having one day coffee in the Foyer at the very top of the main building. And I was sitting on that sofa and then I was looking at the picture and thinking, I know this guy.

[00:20:41] And then I read at the bottom the name of my granduncle and I was like, oh yeah, amazing. And then, so it was so funny, I asked my parents and then my mom said, yeah, I remember he would, because he was the president when my parents were studying at it, and she said that the one, yeah, he used once or twice he came by the rooms where they were working at the studio rooms. Because at the time the studio rooms of the architects were still in the main building.

[00:21:09] **Susan Kish:** Really?

[00:21:09] **Julie Cantalou:** That's really a while ago. In the seventies. Yeah. And so he came by and said hello yeah, I didn't know that, but it was funny.

[00:21:15] I had coffee. I was thinking, I know this guy. Yeah, I'm, my family, I have lots of, I didn't study ETH, but I have lot of family ties to ETH.

[00:21:23] **Susan Kish:** It sounds that way. Listen, thank you so much. This has been a great conversation. I have a couple questions that we always like to ask in the close.

[00:21:32] What is your favorite place to hang out in Zurich?

[00:21:39] **Julie Cantalou:** Somewhere along the Limmat. I think I lived in Brussels for many years and I loved it, but there was one thing I missed so much. There was no water in the city, which for a Swiss person is unthinkable. No water in the city. What ?

[00:21:54] **Susan Kish:** That's true. Geneva, Basel, Zurich Bern, Lucerne.

[00:21:58] **Julie Cantalou:** And I love it. It gives so much space and, in the summers, especially now that summers get hotter and hotter, it gives coolness to the city and, it opens up space.

[00:22:08] **Susan Kish:** Do you have a specific memory from your days working at the ETH? A day? A lunch, a meeting?

[00:22:17] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah. I have a memory. It's both positive and also, I, I don't want to say sad, but there's some melancholy in it because the day when ETH had to shut down because of the covid crisis, I remember that day very clearly.

[00:22:34] **Susan Kish:** March, 2020.

[00:22:36] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah. And we received an email over the weekend, and it told us not to go to the office and stay at home and how they would set up research and education and everything and work and I went to the office, I asked for permission to go to the office to pick up my stuff and my, my computer and the screen. And the keyboard. There was no one, and it was

[00:22:58] **Susan Kish:** That's spooky.

[00:22:59] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, it was spooky. And it really hit me. Oh my God. We and the city was empty. I met no one and took my things and went home, and I think, ETH did an absolutely fantastic job. I was very impressed still am, how well they did, how quickly they switched things, how supportive they were of the staff.

[00:23:18] **Susan Kish:** And then a final question. What did you want to be when you were growing up?

[00:23:25] **Julie Cantalou:** A pilot, and a doctor.

[00:23:30] And first I wanted to be a pilot for a really long time, that was my dream. And then I dunno how I switched. And then I was very interested in medicine actually up to a few months before I started my studies. I was still hesitating between medicine and politics or political sciences.

[00:23:48] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. Listen, thank you so much. Really appreciated this great conversation.

[00:23:55] **Julie Cantalou:** Yeah, thanks Susan for everything. It's really early in the morning on your side of the pond.

[00:24:01] **Susan Kish:** That's all right. The sun has come up now. We're good.

[00:24:05] **Julie Cantalou:** Amazing. No, thank you so much. That was great. Great talk.

[00:24:42] **Susan Kish:** I am Susan Kish, host of the We are ETH series, telling the story of the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top universities in the world with cutting edge research, science and people. The people who were there, the people who are there, and the people who will be there.

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