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Sophia wants to vote

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This editorial originated not from the “Swiss Review” office in Berne, but in a Tasmanian suburb about as far away from the Swiss capital as you can get. Many things look different seen from down under. Even the voting rights that Switzerland grants to its expats appear in a new light.

This privilege comes in for constant criticism in Switzerland. Should people who have never lived in the country also be allowed to vote? On our faraway Antipodean island, we have exhibit A: a young Swiss who has never been to Switzerland but still exercises her democratic right. Let’s call her Sophia. She wants to vote in her first general election this autumn. Her initial thoughts on the matter are surprising: voting can be a bit of a headache – at first she often finds the issues perplexing. But, and this is the big but, today’s Switzerland and the opportunities and challenges it currently faces are what dominate the family conversation once the all-important voting papers arrive. For Sophia, participation in political life therefore means engaging with the real Switzerland of the 21st century – not with an idea of Switzerland based on old reminiscences. By voting, she will become that little bit more Swiss and experience a closer bond with her distant homeland.

What’s wrong with that? Young Swiss Abroad like Sophia need to know that the criticism is not necessarily aimed at them, but reflects domestic considerations instead. Foreigners in Switzerland barely have any opportunities to participate in political life, even if they are well integrated – “secondos” who were born in Switzerland being a prime example. A quarter of the permanent resident population in Switzerland pays taxes but is politically disenfranchised. Many believe that this is one of the dilemmas of direct democracy, hence the enfranchised Swiss Abroad are regarded with a certain amount of suspicion. Neuchâtel and Jura have addressed this dilemma by granting cantonal voting rights to foreign citizens. Cantons in French-speaking Switzerland in particular also allow their communes to grant voting rights to foreign nationals at the local level. However, there is no national approach to dealing with the issue.

Talking of elections, do you intend to vote this autumn? This edition of “Swiss Review” tells you all you need to know about getting on the electoral register.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The cover illustration is by Swiss cartoonist Anna Sommer.

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