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Young people at the anniversary of the New Helvetic Society practising the art of political argument

"We will go from door to door to raise private funding for this," says Hans Stöckli, "and we will canvas all the political parties for support and set up a cross-party lobby group for the project." This should result in the creation of a national centre for political education with a broad-based trustee structure and a federal government mandate.

The need for this is highlighted by international comparative studies on the political knowledge and understanding of 15-year-olds. In 2003, Switzerland only finished in 19th position among 28 participating countries. The Swiss evaluation published at the time was entitled "Adolescents without politics". The study organiser, Fritz Oser, complains of "political illiteracy" in schools, which he says is surprising in a "model democracy". Three years later, a survey was conducted in Switzerland among 1,500 school pupils in Year 9. The results were sobering – virtually nobody was able to name the three powers at federal level correctly. And almost 70% thought that the Federal Council decided whether a referendum is accepted.

Lowering the voting age

The turnout among young adults at elections and referenda is also unsatisfactory: only just over 30% of 18 to 24-year-olds took part in the last national elections. The average turnout stood at just under 50%. "We must generate interest in politics among young people," declared Federal Chancellor Corina Casanova at the New Helvetic Society anniversary event in Biel at the beginning of February. A political culture must be created where young people are included more.

The Federal Chancellor sees a lowering of the voting age from 18 to 16 as a means of achieving this. This measure has already been introduced in Austria and several German federal states. "This would make it possible to close the gap between theory at school and practice at the ballot box," explained Corina Casanova. A great deal of scepticism nevertheless exists in Switzerland. The canton of Glarus already has a voting age of 16, and the idea has been voted on in 18 cantons but rejected in all of them.

RETO WISSMANN is a freelance journalist. He lives in Biel

"Our country needs this cohesive force"

Four questions for Hans Stöckli, President of the New Helvetic Society and the Bernese Council of States member for the Social Democratic Party (SP).

SWISS REVIEW: *What has been the New Helvetic Society's greatest achievement over the past 100 years?*

HANS STÖCKLI: The greatest, biggest and most permanent project of the New Helvetic Society was the foundation of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. It has also played a significant role in the establishment of various institutions for federal cooperation. However, the New Helvetic Society has always been a major factor in Switzerland's unity. It has advocated solidarity between rich and poor, Swiss and foreign citizens, young and old, urban and rural areas, employers and employees, as well as productive cooperation between the political parties and, in particular, the various linguistic groups.

The New Helvetic Society enjoyed its heyday at the time of the two world wars. What is its purpose today?

The society has far fewer members today than in the past. Like all other civic societies, we also had to question our *raison d'être* and concluded that there was still a need for the society. The preservation and strengthening of Switzerland, the nation forged by the will of the people, is something we have to fight for every day. These days, we primarily focus our activities on the political education of the young generation and of newly naturalised Swiss citizens. We aim to help ensure that people who acquire new political rights and obligations in our direct democracy are well equipped to exercise them as responsible citizens.

The society's commemorative publication says that it has become a "bourgeois association for dignitaries and senior citizens". How do you intend to move away from that?

We want to and need to extend our membership and circle of influence. This is another reason why we wish to address issues that concern young people and to stimulate their interest in successful coexistence in Switzerland. The baton should be passed on to the next generation.

Why are you personally committed to this society?

As a young SP town councillor and court president in Biel, I was asked by the then head of human resources at Omega and a Free Democrat, Roger Anker, whether I was interested in joining a local group of the New Helvetic Society that was driven by critical patriotism. I have always had a strong interest in national policy issues and the New Helvetic Society is, in my view, a cohesive force that our country most definitely needs. As a former president of the town of Biel, Switzerland's largest bilingual town, I understand the vital importance of the coexistence of different linguistic groups, and this makes my task as President of the New Helvetic Society easier.

Hans Stöckli, Council of States member and President of the New Helvetic Society

