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Inhaltsverzeichnis

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4 Focus

Switzerland's nuclear debate reignites

10 Profile

Martina Schmid knows how to make a cow's life more pleasant

12 Nature and the environment

Man-made islands are restoring the Reuss delta to its former glory



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14 Culture

Inheritance – blessing or curse? A new Swiss documentary searches for answers

18 Report

How budding astronauts are training on the Gotthard massif

22 Society

Suicide pod forces Switzerland to revisit the issue of assisted dying

Itching to fly – Swiss air travel is back to pre-pandemic levels

26 Politics

Opposition to a digital-only Switzerland comes from a surprising source

Nature protection initiative:
Farmers torpedo biodiversity proposal

30 Literature

The heart-rending poems of Gertrud Pfander, who died aged 24

32 Notes from the Federal Palace

The “Rütli of the Fifth Switzerland” is in Brunnen

35 SwissCommunity news

Cover photo: Cooling tower at the Leibstadt nuclear power plant (canton of Aargau). Photo: Keystone

Direct democracy



I suspect plenty of people living in Switzerland like to have a good grumble about their home country now and again, whereas they will often defend everything about Switzerland whenever they are on holiday abroad. Swiss expatriates probably also recognise this phenomenon. Yet, anyone who by definition has two homes – one in which they live, and another one to which they feel permanently attached – will tend to appreciate the benefits of both.

These thoughts have come to mind because I have been editing this edition of the magazine elsewhere for a change: not in Berne but far away in the stormy southern hemisphere springtime. As a temporary Swiss Abroad, you could say. One of the features of my time away has been the conversations I have had about what it means to be Swiss.

For starters, what is direct democracy? Let me give a careful answer: it is when voters, i.e. the people, not only elect parliament but also give their verdict on specific issues every few months. Every popular vote is a reality check for parliament and government, revealing the thoughts, hopes, fears and wishes of the electorate. What a wonderful concept.

But then the conversation turns to the topic of nuclear energy. Seven years ago, voters decided that Switzerland would not be building any new nuclear power stations, but despite that Energy Minister Albert Rösti now wants to construct new plants. This is a thorny issue. From the point of view of Swiss energy security, such an about-turn makes sense to some extent, if you discount the unresolved question of nuclear waste. From the point of view of democracy, however, circumventing the will of the people seems an audacious move. At least that is how it appears to those visiting far away places who are trying to explain the magic of 'direct democracy'.

But we can breathe a sigh of relief. Regardless of how far parliament and government want to plough ahead with new reactors, it is still the people who will ultimately decide. And maybe more cantons will have introduced e-voting by then, thereby allowing as many Swiss Abroad as possible to have their say on this crucial matter. Without further ado, our lead article in this new edition of “Swiss Review” delves into the nuclear debate that has divided opinion in Switzerland for over half a century.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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