

Letter from Switzerland : Snowbound start to the new year

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

THE new year began in Switzerland with heavy snowfalls, stormy winds, frozen roads, delays in public transport, avalanches in the mountainous regions and a considerable number of traffic accidents.

In Berne Mr Chevallaz's year as President of the Confederation ended with the old year and one minute past midnight Federal Councillor Furgler became the highest magistrate in the land for the next 12 months.

True to tradition on New Year's day he addressed the nation over the TV and radio networks, mentioning all the many pending problems, but striking, on the whole, a moderately optimistic note.

One of the many problems facing the Confederation is the question whether Switzerland should, at last, join the United Nations. The Federal Council and a majority in parliament are known to have been in favour of entry during the last six or so years.

But they have not, as yet, submitted an appropriate pro-

posal to the population of the country, fearing that it would be rejected and dreading the international damage to the country's image such a rejection would cause.

However, 1981 is now to become the year – not yet of a vote – but of the beginning of the "preparation of public opinion." This means that the vote could possibly take place by 1983 or 1984.

Now the question which arises in this connection is whether the present Minister for Foreign Affairs, Pierre Aubert, is the right man to lead the country into the UN, foreign policy thus having become part of home policy.

Mr Aubert's image is not the happiest one and there is even

some speculation as to whether he will be in office long enough to see the problem through.

Even though the former Secretary of State and erstwhile Ambassador in London, Albert Weitnauer, has completely disappeared from public life, the affair as such and the unpleasant part which Pierre Aubert has played in it, have not been forgotten. It all cropped up again in several end-of-the-year press reviews.

Recent public opinion polls (for what they are worth) show clearly that a majority of the Swiss voters would today vote against the country's entry into the UN family of nations.

The United Nations is held to be an expensive and powerless talking shop and time waster.

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powerless, for example, in the case of the Soviet aggression against Afghanistan, powerless in the Far Eastern troubles, powerless to stop the Iran-Iraq war, which constitutes a threat to the Western oil supplies and economies.

To convert public opinion to a positive attitude towards the UN is, at least at present, an enormous, if not impossible task.

If the Confederation now has a new President, the Swiss Army has a new Chief of the General Staff. He is Corps Commander Jörg Zumstein, born 1923, during the last 40 years a military professional.

In other countries his rank would be Four Star General, but in Switzerland the term General is not used in peacetime. Only when a war breaks out around the Confederation do the two chambers of Parliament in combined session elect a General.

Henri Guisan was the last one and it is to be hoped that Corps Commander Zumstein will never formally become his successor.

Gottfried Keller

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