

What Future for British Broadcasting ?

SIR JOHN EDEN, the Minister for Posts and Telecommunications, must announce soon whether or not the government will set up an inquiry into the future of broadcasting. Time is getting short. The charter of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the licence of the Independent Broadcasting Authority expire in mid-1976. The licences for the companies like Rediffusion and British Relay which sell cable or wired television service also run out at the same time and so does the contract between the BBC and the Open University. Already the IBA is in the awkward position of preparing to award franchises for commercial radio stations which could—depending on when the three-year radio licences actually begin—extend beyond the limits of the IBA's statutory life. The usual length of the television authorities' franchises has been 12 years. So whatever decisions are taken by Parliament about broadcasting in the next year or two could fix the shape of Britain's television until 1988.

The report the government was ostensibly waiting for (see *Nature*, 241, 1; 1973) was delivered to Parliament a year late, in December. It was slipped in after questions on the Wednesday before Christmas, and the pressure is on Sir John to say what will happen next. But it is a good guess that the delay means that there is to be no formal inquiry at all. The strongest rumour so far is that the government will submit legislation extending the franchises of the BBC and the ITA until 1981.

There are other possibilities. The government is having to take into its calculations the fact that there must be a general election before June 1975. If it were to extend the lives of the BBC and the ITA for one extra year, until mid-1977, then there would be time for a full committee of inquiry to be set up now and continuing working uninterrupted (provided the Conservatives won again) through the election tension, preparing the recommendations about the long-term future of broadcasting. Or the government might appoint a small committee, a few wise men, to study the subject without hearing the usual vast array of witnesses, and then go ahead with its legislative proposals.

It does seem unlikely that the government would undertake to set the course of broadcasting for a dozen or more years without giving an airing to the many groups who hold passionate and conflicting views about how television should be organized. Several groups have already decided to go ahead on their own. The Social Morality Council has a committee, under the chairmanship of Dame Margaret Miles, already at work. This committee, which meets in private and heard Mr Charles Curran, director general of the BBC, at its session this week, intends to tackle the broad kind of question that the Annan Committee might have done. It will consider the relaxing of the monopolies of the BBC and the ITA, for example, and will also compare British television with services abroad.

The 76 Group, founded several years ago by discontented television professionals within the BBC and

ITA, is about to announce the formation of its own independent inquiry into the future structure of British television. The group, now led by Mr Philip Whitehead, MP, and including Mr Stuart Hood and Mrs Doreen Stephens, formerly of the BBC, was instrumental in leading to the establishment of the Annan Committee.

The Action Society Trust will also wade into the subject and, convinced (as is the 76 Group and many critics), that the TAC's report was inadequate, may concentrate on the new technical developments in communication that Britain should now begin to consider. Yet another inquiry is just being completed by the General Synod of the Church of England. Its emphasis has been on possible changes in religious broadcasting.

Perhaps a more critical question than whether there will be an inquiry or not is how seriously Sir John Eden takes the TAC's report. He has visited the United States recently and should be aware of the contrast between the cable television there and the vagueness about it in the United Kingdom.

Roskill Disinterred

THE British Government appears to be having second thoughts about the decision, itself much delayed, to build a third international airport for London in the Thames estuary, on Maplin Sands. In response to protests from the Opposition and many of its own supporters in the House of Commons that the airport is a potential environmental nuisance, and unnecessary as well, the government has decided that the bill authorizing developments at Foulness should be sent to a Select Committee of the House of Commons—a procedure that will allow reasoned objections to be made by outside interests but which is almost certain to delay a final decision until much later in the year. In the circumstances, it is no surprise that local authorities such as the Liverpool City Council are asking that consideration should be given to the development of an existing provincial airport instead of the development proposed in the Thames estuary, and no doubt this would be a convenient way of shedding some of the burden on local rates. It is more surprising that Mr Anthony Crosland, the Opposition's spokesman on environmental matters, should have lent his support to a reconsideration of the Foulness decision, for it was his sleight of hand which originally diverted the government and the British Airports Authority from swallowing the recommendation of the Roskill commission that the third airport should be built at Stansted.

The decision about the third airport is not merely a parochial matter but a teasing issue in environmental management. There are two questions to be decided—when will a third airport be needed and where should it be put? The Roskill commission estimated, in 1971, that existing