AEI engineers *par excellence*, clumsily managed. Neither company, of course, would accept more than one of these generalizations. The new company will be among the giants of the international electricity industry, although there are several in Europe larger. The Dutch Philips group, for example, is more than half as large again as GEC/AEI in terms of turnover. In the United States, there are five larger companies, headed by General Electric (USA)—no relation to GEC—with a staggering turnover of £7,239 million last year, against £445 million from GEC/AEI. In Britain, only the joint English Electric/Elliott Automation group comes anywhere near the new group—its turnover last year was £334 million.

Mr Weinstock; still cheerful.

There are good reasons for hoping that the size of the new group will bring dividends. Certainly, shareholders will be hoping so, for after the confident predictions of both sides during the battle anything less than complete success is going to feel like failure. Both companies are untidy conglomerates, spreading their activities over a wide range, although GEC opted out of the heavy end of the business several years ago. One of the problems will be deciding what to do with AEI's enormous cable interests, which make up 25 per cent of the company. In other fields the merging of the two companies will be more like a normal process of rationalization, at which Mr Weinstock has shown himself adept. Telecommunications, for example, is ripe for brisk reorganization, and it looks as if AEI's investment in rather dated Strowger electro-mechanical exchanges—which the GPO still needs—will fit in nicely with GEC's work on smaller electronic exchanges. In transistors and semiconductors GEC has a minority interest in Associated Semiconductor Manufacturers (with Mullard) and AEI runs a joint company with Thorn. Apart from this, the companies have substantial interests in radar, automation and process control, transformers and switchgear and domestic appliances.

As befits companies in such advanced fields, both run extensive research activities (see *Nature*, 216, 8: 1967). These will no doubt feel the effects of rationalization too, but this week Mr Weinstock had nothing to say. The electronics and telecommunications interests may well offer the best chance of saving money by integrating research, but it is doubtful whether anything has been decided yet.

Small Change on Degrees

from our Oxford Correspondent

LAST week, Congregation at Oxford resolved, by a narrow margin of votes, to change the university's somewhat anomalous mode of classifying BAs. At nearly all the other universities of Britain, degrees are divided into three classes, the best and worst 10 per cent of students receiving firsts and thirds, and the intermediate 80 per cent being subdivided into upper and lower divisions. At Oxford, four classes have been awarded. Last year, the proportion of firsts was the same as in other universities, at 10 per cent. But there were fewer seconds (60 per cent) and far more thirds (28 per cent). Fourths are rarely awarded, and Congregation voted unanimously to abolish the class.

So what distinguishes the Oxford system is the large size of the third class and the lack of subdivision of the second. The proposers of the resolution before Congregation claimed that some students who received thirds at Oxford, and thereby are financially penalized in certain professions, would have received lower second class degrees elsewhere. This may possibly be true, though account should be taken that few undergraduates drop out of Oxford, while at some universities large numbers of students leave who would otherwise go on to swell the numbers of the third class. But if it is true that an Oxford third could have been a London lower second, the remedy is simple: award more seconds.

The argument for the division of the second class is that those awarded a second vary in ability from the borderline firsts to those who narrowly managed to avoid thirds; that, in fact, the class designates everyone except the very best and the very worst, and is meaningless as a classification. But the nature of the normal curve is such that it is far more difficult to judge fairly who is just above the average than to distinguish the very best and very worst students from the rest. There is also the question of postgraduate studies. Whether or not a student can stay on for a postgraduate course depends on the availability of grants; if he has a first, there is no problem; if he has a second, then the matter will rest on his tutor's recommendation and that of his head of department. So the really important classification is not a formal one. Those few employers, notably the Civil Service Commissioners, who draw a distinction between good and bad seconds, can always be informed of the nature of a candidate's degree by his tutor.

Nevertheless, by 101 votes to 99, with a number of abstentions, Congregation has decided to change the degree classes—a narrow vote on a decision that will alter little; still, Oxford may have cause to regret it. Flexibility, by which is meant indeterminacy, is adduced in defence of Oxford's various institutions quite as often as "democracy", and with as little justification in most cases. But in the degree arrangements, perhaps, flexibility worked.