

virtually no improvement in the number of telephone calls going wrong; the failure rate is about one in ten, and worse than that in London. The corporation obviously believes that there is no need to apologize for the sins of its father. But some acknowledgment of sin there should be. There is absolutely no justification for revamping the Post Office into something else unless it is to give Britain a better telephone service.

The new corporation must obviously avoid false promises. It would be folly to promise that, in a matter of months, every lifting of the receiver will bring a dial tone or that every mountain dweller can have a telephone. The waiting list for new telephones is still about 85,000, in spite of a monumental reduction. The telecommunications industry is still too slow in supplying the new exchanges on which expansion rests—and even in supplying modest new devices, like the Trimline phone, which the Post Office is timidly offering as part of its new line of goods. What the new board of directors plans to do, apparently, is to take a long look at the inherited problems. Then, next April, a report will be released, revealing the diagnosis. A year later, something like a five-year plan will emerge. In it should be some of the sophisticated economic calculations—how to apportion charges more fairly between local calls, which are too cheap, and trunk calls, which are too dear, for example—which were never the strong point of the old GPO.

Eventually some blunt and simple questions are going to have to be answered. When can Britain expect to have, like the Americans and the Swedes, one telephone for each two people in the population? (Britain now ranks eighth among developed countries in telephone density, with fewer than twenty-five 'phones per 100 people.) And when, if commercialism is to be its mandate, will the corporation actually be able to encourage the demand for telephone service? The new corporation, terrified like the GPO that demand will explode, has small incentive to make sure that calls reach their destination or to lower rates in case these improvements only persuade more people to ask for a telephone.

The problem all boils down to money and where to find it. The new corporation is supposedly free to go abroad for the capital needed to pay for the expansion of the service. But will it dare? And will the Treasury actually allow it? The debt ceiling for the Post Office has been raised, from £1,750 million to £2,200 million. What happens when that is reached? Another clamp-down on expansion and demand?

Some loud voices in the Conservative Party are demanding that telecommunication expansion should be financed by private capital, while the Labour Party is committed to the idea that all telecommunications must remain a monopoly for all eternity. It is a pity that such a crucial question, financing the necessary expansion, makes such a neat and divisive political issue. The French have now decided that public money cannot possibly put their dreadful telephone system right and will allow some private companies to run parts of the service on contract. The Americans,

on the left as well as the right wing, boast of their privately financed telephone service, and if the New York system has now come a cropper, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company is having to do such penance before its governmental regulator, the Federal Communications Commission, as the British Post Office never dreamed of. The new corporation must be prepared to try radical (in the widest sense) solutions to finance the expansion of the telecommunications system.

There are other tasks for the new corporation, such as keeping the letter deliveries going, setting up its National Data Processing Service and persuading people to use the Giro. But its telephone service is the heart of the matter. That is where the profits are and that is where the national shame is. The corporation may be wise not to promise miracles but might it not at least start life by saying frankly what its wishes are for the future?

SPACE

Soyuz Six, Seven and Eight

THE undoubted excitement and propaganda stimulus of the multiple Soyuz flight has tended both to re-stress and obscure the current aims of the Russian space programme. Certainly, the prestige of a space spectacular, starring more men in orbit than ever before, would appear to be an attempt to re-establish the Soviet space image (somewhat tarnished since last July) in public opinion both at home and abroad as well as to serve as a technological gala to celebrate the imminent centenary of Lenin's birth.

From the first indication that welding experiments were to be carried out "in conditions of high vacuum and weightlessness" it was assumed that the Soyuz spacecraft would link up to form a space station, to serve as a basis for future manned lunar and interplanetary research, since the construction of such a station is one of the historical objectives of Russian space plans, dating back to Tsiolkovski's *Beyond the Earth* (1920).

Docking manoeuvres, too, seem to have involved at least a certain amount of practice. Thus, the initial orbital parameters of Soyuz 6 were: apogee 223 km, perigee 186 km, orbital inclination 51.7°, period 88.36 min. After orbital corrections to Soyuz 6 and the launch of Soyuz 7, a situation was reached in which both craft had the same inclination, 51.7°, and period, 88.6 min. but somewhat different eccentricities (Soyuz 6: perigee 230 km, apogee 194 km; Soyuz 7: perigee 226 km, apogee 207 km).

Leaving aside the "prestige" and "spectacular" aspects of the project, what appear to be the aims of this particular project? Apart from the "welding" tests, the programme includes geographical and geological surveying of the Earth and "scientific investigation of the physical characteristics of near-Earth space", and also investigation of the atmosphere "with the aim of working out methods of using the data obtained in the national economy". This seems to be the first official hint of attempts to make out an economic justification for the Russian space programme.