

Decisions in Secret

THE Post Office believes that it has learned two lessons from its own history. The first is not to put all its eggs in one basket; the second is to disguise big decisions so that they cannot later be said to have been wrong. For the switching system for the British telephone network in the years immediately ahead, the Post Office has, after long deliberation, decided to order the controversial TXE-4 reed-relay exchange. But it will not order nearly as many as it might have done. At the same time, it will increase by tenfold its purchases of crossbar exchanges (which advanced telephone systems in other countries now rely on), so that crossbar will actually outweigh TXE-4 in the system to a considerable degree. And there will be more orders of the smaller TXE-2 exchanges which, like the TXE-4, depend on reed relays to make their electrical contacts. This mixed package will bridge the gap between the antiquated Strowger step-by-step switching on which Britain's telephones deplorably now depend and the electronic, solid-state, digital, computer-directed exchanges of the future.

This mix has been specially designed to placate the Post Office's three major suppliers, Standard Telephones and Cables, GEC, and Plessey. STC has been producing TXE-4s—16 of them under an initial contract worth £15 million. But the other two, Plessey particularly, were not keen to follow suit. They have seen the TXE-4 as a stopgap invention, eccentrically British, of little export value. The Post Office would probably have liked to nominate the TXE-4 as the standard large (over 10,000 lines) exchange for the next few years but it would have done so at the risk of offending Plessey and also of making a conspicuous major error.

But is the decision the right one for Britain? The Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Sir John Eden, will have to give his approval before it is made final. Sir John appreciates the gravity of his action, about £1,300 million is to be spent on telephone exchanges over the next five years and the present state of the service is sad and the long waiting lists of would-be subscribers are a political embarrassment. But who will advise him—if not the Post Office and the three suppliers most concerned?

Such important choices and the debates that precede them should be made in public. The fact that the details are technical and tedious to the ordinary politician, let alone the man in the street, is irrelevant. There are a great many technically literate people around and a great number of companies (one must remember that they need not all be British) which might have technical and commercial solutions to offer on Britain's telephone dilemma. Their views should be heard. Sir John Clark, chairman of Plessey, worked hard to dissuade the Post Office from too heavy a reliance on the TXE-4 and apparently he succeeded. But should not such experts from vested interests give their advice to the Post Office in the knowledge that it will be open to criticism from those outside the Post Office?

The uncertainties over the TXE-4 are not hard to resolve. People at STC are confident that it has export potential, that it is the best possible bridge between Strowger and an all-electronic system and that it can be modified, as the telephone network is modernized, to in-

clude solid state technology. But had the deliberations been open, people might have been reminded, as they certainly have not, that the TXE-4 will not give telephone users any of the new services like abbreviated dialling, calls recorded at the exchange if the subscriber is out, and automatic transfer to calls to another number that are becoming available in Canada and the United States.

The TXE-4-crossbar compromise has been secretly arrived at and it has done little to create the needed new relationship between the Post Office and industry on research and development. Moreover, it seems to have been conducted with hardly a mention of the word Europe, even though the European Economic Community intends that there should be an all-European integrated telephone network by the 1990s, with a true common market in supplies of communications equipment.

Euratom Soldiers On

THE best thing to say about the agreement between the European governments reached in Brussels on February 6 about the future of Euratom is that it provides a tangible programme for the next three years. Uncertainty is good for nobody and the uncertainty which has plagued the four joint research laboratories for almost five years has been especially damaging to the staff. So far, so good. But it remains something of a mystery to know whether the compromise at Brussels will do much more than postpone the question of what should be done about the four laboratories which are in practice the only tangible legacy of the ambitious plans for a coordinated European research programme in nuclear energy mapped out by Euratom in the 1950s. Where nuclear fission is concerned, the joint research laboratories have only an insubstantial contribution to make to the development of practical power stations—their experimental and test reactors, for example, contribute nothing of substance to the devices which are available elsewhere, while there is no prospect that the joint research laboratories will be able to recapture the opportunity for coordinating development on schemes such as those for fast reactors now being pursued independently, and with very little collaboration, in Britain, France, Germany and Italy. On fusion, the laboratories have a potentially more valuable part to play, but even here the sceptics can fairly say that even this opportunity will be lost before another three years have passed.

What might be done? A coordinated policy on fusion research is necessary and it would be in everybody's interest if the several governments with a finger in the pie would at least explore the possibility that Euratom might become a coordinating authority. At the same time, however, it might be recognized that Euratom has very little more to say or do about fission reactors, but that there is a need—an urgent need—for a better articulation of national research programmes on fast reactors and that Euratom might act as a kind of secretariat for that process. For the rest, it should be acknowledged that the best use of the staff that Euratom has accumulated would be to serve as extra manpower for the national laboratories already doing useful work in fields where European integration is inevitable—in standards and metrology, for example. The fact that the new budget