

Neddies"? The real trouble is, however, deeper and more serious. The public commissions seem to have become entirely persuaded of the Government's need of compromise. They are forever hiding behind their terms of reference. In their anxiety to produce recommendations that will be acceptable, they go to far too much trouble to avoid giving offence. The result is that their reports are vapid documents. This is not just a bad joke, but an enormous waste of busy people's time. There is an urgent need for a moratorium on the process, preferably without committee discussion in advance.

Nuclear Compromise

THE long argument over what should happen to the British nuclear power industry now seems likely to be settled by a compromise. Rejecting the advice of those who favour a single design authority, Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn told the House of Commons last week that he favours the formation of two "design and construction organizations", and that the Industrial Reorganization Corporation is to help in devising ways in which the two teams could be set up. The IRC has already had discussions with the industry, so it may be assumed that this pattern is one which the IRC thought feasible, but it will certainly not be easy to bring about.

The central part of the new structure, according to Mr Benn, will be the fuel company. This will be a public company, with its entire share capital owned initially by the Government. Later on, the fuel company will take up minority shareholdings in the two design and construction organizations—the rumour is that it will acquire 30 per cent of the shareholding. But it is not clear what exactly these organizations will be; Mr Benn's statement suggests that they will be "closely integrated" with the manufacturers of the main elements of nuclear boilers, which is generally taken to mean that they will be something like the existing consortia but incorporating elements of the Atomic Energy Authority.

If this interpretation is correct, the AEA will be losing its reactor group and its fuel business. Until legislation is introduced, the AEA will be responsible for looking after the fuel company for the Government, but this is only an interim measure. Ultimately—perhaps in two years or so—the fuel company will pass entirely from the control of the AEA. These changes will mean that about 9,600 people at present employed by the AEA will have to shift to new organizations (or get out of the business altogether). About 9,000 of these will go to the public fuel company (it may be a few less, because some will stay to run Chapelcross and Calder Hall), where life is unlikely to be very different from life within the AEA. The other 600 are in the design team which will be split in some way between the two design and construction groups.

It is hard at the moment to see how the two groups can be put together. But at the end of last week, three of the companies which make boilers announced plans for a merger which will cross the boundaries of the existing consortia. The three companies, John Thompson Ltd, Clarke Chapman Ltd, and International Combustion Ltd, are to merge to form a company with a capital of £32 million. John Thompson and Clarke

Chapman are both members of the Nuclear Power Group, which has won the contracts for advanced gas cooled reactors at Hinkley Point B and Hunterston B. International Combustion, on the other hand, owns 50 per cent of Atomic Power Constructions, which is building the first AGR, Dungeness B. The other half of APC, Fairey Engineering, is thus left out in the cold for the time being, and may be tempted to link up with Nuclear Design and Construction, the third of the existing consortia. NDC is responsible for the last of the Magnox stations, Wylfa (which suffered a small fire this week) but has won no AGR contract yet, and is in a comparatively weak position.

While these elaborate musical chairs are in progress, existing contracts will have to be worked off. In addition, some of the companies have arrangements with European companies which they are anxious to preserve. This is going to make life very complicated for the next few years, until the new structure asserts itself. Meanwhile the AEA seems determined to maintain its grip on the Prototype Fast Reactor which is being developed at Dounreay and on the Steam Generating Heavy Water Reactor which has started operating at Winfrith. When the time comes, the AEA explains that both these designs can be offered on licence to the design and construction groups. The same will presumably be true of the high temperature reactor Dragon, which is being developed collaboratively by the European Nuclear Energy Agency at Winfrith. Mr Benn also visualizes the formation of an Atomic Energy Board on which the AEA, the design and construction organizations, the generating boards and the fuel company would be represented. The board, he said, would be concerned with research and development planning, export coordination and major policy matters.

Although, so far, these are only suggestions for discussion, they raise some interesting issues. The AEA, it is clear, will gradually work itself out of a job on the nuclear side if it is not allowed to initiate new designs. What will be left will be a rump AEA dedicated to diversification projects such as those which are in progress at Harwell, and to running the reactors at Chapelcross, Calder Hall, Winfrith and ultimately Dounreay. As for the design and construction organizations, it is hard to see that this is anything but another way of saying consortia. The fuel company will take a minority holding in the organizations, but who will take a majority holding? One of the weaknesses of the existing consortia in international competition is that they have no capital to back them, because their constituent companies have been reluctant or unable to provide it. The proposals so far made will do nothing to correct this. In this sense, the proposals look like a complicated way of reducing the number of consortia to two. They may produce nothing but an unhappy compromise.

BMA and Abortion Law

THE BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION has adopted a curious attitude towards the new Abortion Act which came into operation on April 27 this year. At the annual conference held at Eastbourne last month, the association gave its assent to a view which in effect threatens doctors with expulsion if they carry out abortion on certain of the grounds permitted by the Act.