

New details on the costs of British Telecom's phone-tapping: Duncan Campbell reports.

British Teletap Inc.

MORE THAN A MILLION pounds a year is spent on paying phone tappers by the British government, according to government and Post Office documents obtained this week by the *New Statesman*. The budget for the year which ended last month is £1,370,000 — and this only pays the wages and National Insurance contributions of the staff whom the Post Office (soon to become British Telecom) have employed to connect and operate the taps.

Our investigations have also unearthed the new cover adopted by the Post Office's special phone tapping division. Last February, when we revealed the thousand-line phone tapping centre in Ebury Bridge Road, London, the division was called the 'Equipment Development Division' of the PO's Operational Programme Department.

It is now called the 'Equipment Development Policy Division' of British Telecom's Exchange Services Department.

Its code number has been changed from 'OP5' to 'ES4', and after the *NS* revelations it was given a new phone number for staff, 01-432 4367. This is a cover number which is connected to a special Post Office exchange in Gresham Street in the City of London. The tappers also have a cover address at the same building. A previous number was revealingly connected to a Chelsea exchange.

Since the *NS* revelations, all references to ES4 have been deleted from the Post Office's Telecommunications HQ staff direc-

tory, and PO employees have been ordered to treat the directory as 'classified', and to have copies pulped under security control when out of date.

The budget for the telephone tappers' pay was £1.2m for 1978/9, £1.29m for 1979/80, and £1.37m for 1980/81. The budget has risen at around 7 per cent a year. These figures include purely nominal capital costs, and it may be that an agency other than the Post Office pays for capital expenditure.

The tapping budget for 1981/82 will be just under £1.5 million excluding capital costs. This suggests there are between 110 and 150 Post Office employees whose full-time job is tapping other people's phones.

These staff do not, however, have to *listen* to any calls, which is the most time-consuming part of the work — that is done by MI5, the Special Branch, and other tapping 'consumers'. The productivity of the phone tappers, who merely have to fix up the lines, therefore seems very low if the government figures on the number of phone taps every year are accepted. In 1979, for example, the Home Office claims that only 463 warrants for tapping were issued. That implies that each Post Office phone tapper could only manage to operate, roughly, 3-4 taps in the course of each year.

Since the *NS* revelations, the tappers have stopped using the main door to their premises at the rear of 93 Ebury Bridge Road, SW1. In fact there is a secret security door