

A professional body for teachers

In my book *Professional Ethics*, published in 1969, I said of school teaching in England that its lack of a representative body (apart from trade union aspects) prevented it from being a true profession. It is to the credit of Mr Blair's Government that that particular deficiency is at long last being remedied. Chapter I of Part I of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 provides for the setting up of a General Teaching Council for England and another for Wales. Scotland has had one since 1966. In what follows "the GTC" refers to the English council; arrangements for Wales will be similar.

The GTC is expected to become operational next September. Already elections have been held for the 64 places on the Council, consisting of-

- 25 elected teachers;
- 9 teachers appointed by the main teaching unions;
- 17 appointments by various representative bodies, mostly from within the education system, and
- 13 Secretary of State appointees.

The elected teachers consist of 11 primary teachers, 11 secondary teachers, 1 primary headteacher, 1 secondary headteacher; and 1 special school teacher.

It is officially said that the GTC will be the independent professional body for all teachers, and will provide an authoritative voice for the profession. Its aims are to maintain and enhance the profession's standards; and to improve the public standing of teaching. It is claimed that the GTC will be a leading player in shaping the education service of the future, and will bring a fresh and authoritative perspective by drawing on the experience and knowledge of over 400,000 teachers. It will advise the Secretary of State and others on a wide range of issues, including:

- the recruitment and supply of new teachers;
- initial training and induction;
- ongoing professional development, and
- medical fitness and professional conduct.

A key role will be to advise on teacher training and professional development. The GTC will have a legal right to be consulted on any future change in the standards required for entry to teaching. It will keep a register of qualified teachers, and registration will be a requirement for practising as a teacher in a maintained school. Other fully qualified teachers will also be eligible to register. The GTC will draw up a Code of Professional Conduct and Practice. It will have powers to remove individual teachers from the register if it finds them guilty of serious professional misconduct or incompetence. Initial funding is by the Government, but after that financing of the GTC will be by an annual registration fee, ensuring independence from the government of the day. Teachers in Scotland currently pay £20 per year to the GTC for Scotland.

The Act enables the Secretary of State to require the GTC to give him such assistance as he may specify under the Education Reform Act 1988 s 218(2) to determine whether a person is a qualified teacher. He may require the GTC to maintain records relating to such categories of persons (including persons not eligible to be registered) as may be prescribed; and the records must contain prescribed information relating to those persons. The GTC must carry out such additional functions as the Secretary of State may direct, so his authority over them is considerable.

All this is laudable no doubt, but there is a question mark. School teachers in the state sector are required to register with the GTC; for those in the private sector registration is optional. Why should this be? Other professions do not observe this distinction. If the teaching profession is really intended to be independent of the Government should not registration with the profession's ruling body be compulsory for all members? This would require that all school teachers, and not just those in maintained schools, should be required to register. There is a long history of strife between the public and private sector in teaching, illustrated by the fact that, in the days of teacher probation (abolished by Kenneth Clarke, who characteristically declared it "a complete Horlicks"), service in independent schools was not recognised for probation.

My anxiety over this is shared by John Sayer, whose book *Towards the General Teaching Council* (1989) was instrumental in furthering the GTC movement which led to the passing of the 1998 Act. In his 2000 book *The General Teaching Council* (Cassell) Sayer says (p. 170) that what the Act effects is not yet the GTC constituency which has been suggested by its proponents. He adds: "The GTC is about the protection and trust of the public, about the quality of education and the skills and qualities and morale of teachers. How is the public protected until all teachers are required to be qualified and to register?"

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