

Unity ... one union for all teachers!

"Why isn't there just one teachers' union?" This is a common question put by students at freshers' fairs when the annual competition for membership comes round in the colleges and universities at the start of courses.

It is not a question that is meant to trigger a discourse on the troubled history of teachers' organisations in England and Wales. There is a great deal of history, covering a relatively short space of time. It is a history rich in events, drama and personalities. But those who ask the question do not really want to know only of the past. The question is intended to be an observation, a proposal and a criticism.

It is sometimes asked in a different form, more judgementally, "Wouldn't it be better if there was only one teachers' organisation?". That is a question much more difficult to address through a review of the history of conflict and difference. It looks to the future and not to the past. It is a serious question and deserves to be properly considered if the question – and the answer – is to change the history of the teaching profession. Competition and rivalry have been a driving force, providing fuel for the energy required to give pace to the provision of protective services, benefits and other advantages of membership. Market forces and the struggle for membership have stimulated growth and kept prices down. For the range of facilities, benefits, services, activities and communications available to their members, the teachers' organisations provide some of the best value in the trade union movement. And the penetration of the teachers' associations into the workforce being organised, is amongst the highest in the TUC.

Over the years, competition has led to variation in policies. Differing perceptions over wide ranges of issues have made it possible to weigh up, not only costs and benefits, but also attitudes, campaigns and positions. Some have argued and continue to argue, that by speaking with many voices, the teachers' organisations can between them accommodate all views, thus enhancing union membership overall.

Not all representatives of the teachers' organisations would, therefore, give "yes" as an unqualified response to the "wouldn't it be better..." question. Those that say "no" might change their views if the question were to be changed to, "Wouldn't it be better if, given certain conditions, there was only one teachers' organisation?". The agreement of many, perhaps most, other than a die-hard minority, might depend on the conditions under which the proposition was to be fulfilled.

There are some facets of the work of the teachers' organisations that can be considered and dealt with relatively easily. Competition, ironically, has led to growing similarities between the major teachers' organisations, at least in England. All have regional structures to support a framework of casework and trouble-shooting support to their members. Regional structures vary in detail but essentially the intention to deliver support is similar if not identical.

At local authority and at school levels there is much duplication of structure and activities. Few organisations find it easy to recruit local officers and the replication

within the same areas of structures and posts is not the most effective arrangement through which to achieve representation.

No one teachers' organisation can allow another to provide, unmatched, a key benefit giving an edge however small or specialised. Competition and market forces, therefore, create increasingly look-alike benefits and services with discounts and financial advantages.

The three major teachers' unions are affiliated to the TUC and to Educational International, and all have representatives on the GTC. Within these bodies, their voices are similar and mutually supportive. Joint proposals, attitudes and motions are more frequent than rival propositions. All support and, in varying degrees, refer members to 'Teacherline'. All produce regular journals and have inter-active websites.

And the similarities lead on from there into campaigning activities. Increasingly, campaigns are now pursued through two or even the four TUC affiliated teachers' bodies acting together. Campaigning together not only strengthens the campaign but also protects the various organisations from adverse membership movement and short-term advantage.

The study of workload by PriceWaterhouseCoopers would not have been commissioned by the Government and the New Flexibilities on Cover Agreement with the Employers would not have come about without the joint campaign, 'Cover to Contract' undertaken by the NASUWT and the NUT in mutually supportive and competitive partnership.

Such are the similarities and so close are the parallels that they would not present a mountain of difficulty to overcome in seeking to mould the conflicting bodies into one. Most mergers between commercial companies or amalgamations of unions face far more severe gulfs to span. So what is it that creates such a challenge to progress and unification?

The answer to that question is the answer to the very first question posed: "Why isn't there just one teachers' union?". The answer is history and all that flows from it. Fundamental differences in philosophy and policy issues including equal pay, selection, corporal punishment, and negotiating rights, TUC affiliation and teacher professionalism have created a legacy of profound distrust. No organisation will readily disclaim or renounce its past; the prospects of one being perceived to have prevailed will act as a sheet anchor and a betrayal.

Previous moves to achieve unity have foundered on the resistance of General Secretaries and National Executives – not from the NUT in either case – and their determination not to be the instruments of the termination of their association's existence. The key to the realisation of a single teachers' organisation is the avoidance for any of the current bodies of a 'winners and losers' environment. All must be winners.

For many years the NUT's position, based on the recognition that all must prevail, has been a preparedness to commit itself to ending its existence on the mutual agreement of the other major organisations to do likewise. With new structures and democratic systems, an entirely new organisation, a single organisation for the profession would emerge. There would be no take-over, no buy-out.

The means by which this could be achieved would need to be determined. It might well not be easy to arrive at a working formula but once launched through a declaration of intent, all difficulties would be overcome. If competition can be changed to co-operation, distrust to trust and rivalry to collegiality, progress will be made.

And the prize is considerable. The single body with a potential membership, including students and retired teachers, would be of the order of half a million. It would be one of the largest unions in the TUC. It would be one of the largest teachers' unions in Europe. In its power to negotiate advantageous purchasing rights, it would be formidable.

The rationalisation and restructuring of its delivery of services would enhance the access of teachers to advice, guidance and support. The competing publications and internet presentations would be supplanted by more in-depth coverage of wider ranges of issues and interests. Resources, mainly in the form of members' subscriptions, could be used to improve services and communications. They would fund the new ways to discover and apply the views of members. For the new body would be truly the voice of the teaching profession.

None of this will be easy. Experience in the United States demonstrates that carefully negotiated agreements can fail to reach fruition even after painstaking preparation and careful negotiation.

But with commitment and determination, we could move to a new era when the teaching profession in England and Wales is represented by a single organisation. Competition and rivalry with teachers' organisations vying with each other for influence, power and members will at last be of historical interest only.

The NUT is the oldest of the teachers' organisations in England and Wales and it is the largest. The NUT is enjoying year-on-year membership growth.

The National Union of Teachers stands ready to work with the other teachers' organisations in pursuit of a single organisation. Our commitment is firm and clear. When the other organisations are ready to do so, we will enter into talks on principle and detail. The year 2002 could, with good will on all sides, be a significant year for all teachers in England and Wales. Teachers, as members of their organisations, can help bring this movement about by their own work and advocacy at school, local and national levels. One union for all teachers!