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INTERESTING TIMES

Historic decisions are not often made, but last week members of the Council of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society voted to change its constitution. They accepted an increase in the lay membership from 12.5 per cent (three out of the current 24 members) to between 30 and 40 per cent in a Council that will consist of between 24 and 30 members (see p463). Much to the surprise of some onlookers present, there was no blood on the carpet and, even though the decision was not unanimous, an overwhelming majority voted in favour of the change.

That decision has, however, made some groups in the profession even more determined to give the Council, the Society and the modernisation steering group as rocky a ride as possible over the next few months. The announcement of the decision has come out of the blue to many Society watchers who understood that the consultation process was still in train and that there would be an opportunity at the British Pharmaceutical Conference to express their views. They are set to use their influence to have the decision revoked, and suggest a different structure for the Council that, in their view, would better reflect the professional representative role of the Society by having fewer lay members on board.

But will more lay members necessarily reduce the professional representative role of Council? Is there not a chance that pharmacy might benefit from their presence? Many members of the Society complain that the profession has been sidelined in recent years, that the Government never really listens to their concerns and that the public do not appreciate the fact that they are health professionals, and really know their stuff when it comes to medicines.

Imagine a Council with a working majority of pharmacists and, say, eight lay members. Imagine one is a vice-chancellor of a university, another is a leading member of the Royal College of Physicians, another the chairman of an NHS trust, the fourth a City patent lawyer with an international reputation and the other four equally eminent. Can a case not be made that with such a group on board, pharmacy's light is unlikely to be diminished? There may be concerns that such lay members will bring their own agendas to the party but if the right lay people are chosen they could bring contacts and influence undreamt of in the past.

There are strong arguments on both sides of the divide. Clearly, the Council members have to decide on the precise make-up of the future Council, which could go some way to alleviate the fears of members. Those implacably opposed to the change will have to decide their strategy. We continue to live in interesting times.

WALES MOVES ONE STEP FORWARD

The long-awaited strategy for pharmacy in Wales has been published (p427). The strategy is a discussion document, so everyone with a view has a chance to be heard before formal plans are put forward next year.