

The Ongoing Failure of the WA College of Teaching

by Steve Kessell

The Western Australian government has created perhaps the only “representative professional body” in the Free World that has no elected professional representatives. It is the WA College of Teaching (WACOT) and its short history is disgraceful.

WACOT was created to undertake activities which would enhance the status of the teaching profession and of teachers, and to administer the scheme of teacher registration in WA.

There are approximately 40,000 teachers in WA, and it is illegal to teach in WA unless you are a member of WACOT.

The WACOT Act provides for a Board of Management with 19 members: nine representing various education “sectors” and appointed by the Minister for Education and Training, and ten to be elected by the members.

That nearly half of the Board of a so-called “representative professional body” will always be Government-appointed strikes me as being rather unusual. But so far, there have been no elected representatives. Why?

When WACOT was established on 15 September 2004, the ten to-be-elected teacher representatives were also appointed by the minister, to serve until an election could be held.

WACOT’s enabling legislation allowed the election for teacher representatives to be held any time after 15 March 2006. But March came and went, and there was no hint of any plans for an election. Many teachers believed that the appointed Board was in no hurry to be replaced by elected teacher representatives.

Following many unpleasant telephone calls and emails from WACOT members, an election was finally scheduled for 10 November 2006.

But now the fiasco begins.

WACOT announced, on its website and in a mailing to all members, that “all teachers must update – verify their details on the WACOT website” or else they would be denied a vote.

Of course, WACOT already had these details for all 40,000 teachers, else it could not have registered them in the first place.

One of the crucial items WA teachers had to “verify” was their telephone area code; one suspects that most WA teachers have an area code of (08). All teachers who did not “verify” their area codes were deemed to be ineligible to vote!

Another such essential item was to confirm that if you taught at Rossmoyne Senior High School, you are in the “government sector”, but those teaching at Scotch College were in the “independent sector”.

It is difficult to believe that a database verification system could be so appallingly constructed and administered, and many saw this as a deliberate attempt to disenfranchise teachers.

And that is exactly what happened.

WACOT also changed the registration deadline, twice, when it learned its original two deadlines were in violation of the Electoral Act.

It turns out that a large number of teachers failed to engage in this ludicrous data verification exercise, and on 28 September 2006, just after the final WACOT deadline, then education minister Ljiljana Ravlich admitted to Parliament [in response to a Question by shadow education minister Peter Collier] that:

“The reason for ineligibility of registered [WACOT] members [to vote] is that the required information as requested by the college... has not been provided.” [Hansard, 28/9/2006].

It gets worse. On 1 November 2006, the Electoral Commission cancelled the in-progress election, because the WACOT election rules were illegal; by this stage, postal voting was nearly complete. In December, the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation formally disallowed those same rules [Hansard, 7/12/2006].

We still do not know how many thousands of teachers were disenfranchised by WACOT's ridiculous “verify your details that we already have” procedure.

WACOT now advises its members that an election MIGHT be held by the end of 2007. Not for certain, but possibly.

Thus it will be more than THREE YEARS from the establishment of WACOT until the first election is held – three years during which all members of the Board of Management of the “teachers’ represented body” were appointed by the minister and none were elected by the membership. During that time, teachers will have had to pay compulsory fees to remain employed without any effective representation on their own professional association.

Only in Western Australia or the old Soviet Union would one expect this to happen, where a so-called representative professional organisation – deemed by legislation to be “independent” – is in fact totally Government-controlled.

Could it get still worse? Yes, it did. The then minister Ljiljana Ravlich wrote to WACOT on 13 July 2006, advising them to alter the rules they had drawn up for the election, because she would not approve either preferential voting or “ticket” voting [letter obtained under Freedom of Information].

This strikes me as a bit rich, given that Ms Ravlich was elected to Parliament by preferential voting on an ALP party ticket.

Opposition shadow education minister Peter Collier thinks this was a deliberate attempt by Ms Ravlich to block candidates who represented the teacher group People Lobbying Against Teaching Outcomes (PLATO).

In a media statement on 20 February 2007, Mr Collier said:

"In addition, in a letter obtained by the Opposition under FOI, it was blatantly evident that the former Education Minister sought to prevent education lobby group PLATO from gaining significant representation on the board.

"The former Minister clearly changed the voting system to ensure that the election of members of PLATO would be minimal."

Ms Ravlich also warned the WACOT Board that their election rules might not pass the scrutiny of Parliament. They didn't, and thus the long-overdue election was delayed for another entire year.

What else has WACOT done since its creation 2 ½ years ago. According to its members: "bugger-all".

WACOT has remained mute on the most pressing education issues and debates in the State: outcomes-based education, the "levelling" method of assessment and the teacher shortage crisis. The "teachers' representative body" apparently has nothing to say, and it certainly isn't about to survey its members to obtain their views.

But it regularly sends out glossy newsletters to members, at an estimated cost of \$1 - 2 each [times 40,000 members], when emailing the same information would cost virtually nothing. I'm told that many teachers deposit these self-serving glossy brochures in the nearest bin, frequently while uttering an expletive.

WACOT continues to appoint more staff, and collect \$70 from all 40,000 teachers every year. Yet as PLATO founder Greg Williams said in a Letter in The West Australian on 2 November 2006:

"All that WACOT had to do in its first two years of existence was register 40,000 teachers correctly and conduct the election," he said. "It has failed miserably in both of those."

Williams also called for WACOT Board Chairman Brian Lindberg, who was appointed by then education minister Alan Carpenter and is a former president of the State School Teachers Union, to step down.

There are a dozen different discussion threads on the PLATO website, all condemning WACOT and advising Mr Lindberg to retire.

I suspect that most of the 40,000 members would agree with Greg Williams and the PLATO contributors, while they continue to wonder what WACOT is doing with the \$ 2.8 million it takes off them each year.

Many members see WACOT as just another Government education bureaucracy, and are refusing to pay their 2007 membership fees until a new election has been called.

During this period of unprecedented, virtually weekly, changes brought about by WA's ill-advised implementation of outcomes-based education – particularly in upper secondary

– teachers have felt totally disenfranchised from the decision making process. Their opportunity to contribute to the education debate, through THEIR elected representatives on the WACOT Board, has been stymied. Until they gain such representation, teachers will continue to feel cynical and negative about the decision making process in a profession in which they are the most pivotal component.

There is no logical reason why the election cannot be held within the next three months, but clearly the current appointed WACOT Board does not want this to happen.

Teachers are waiting for strong, effective and representative leadership, so they can get on with what they do best – Teach. Many believe that this is not being provided by either their unions or their professional associations, and it certainly isn't coming from a government-controlled WACOT.

They neither need nor want careerist educrats and politicians interfering with what they do so well.

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