

Majesty praying that the Scheme made under paragraph 4 of the Schedule to the Nurses' Registration Act, 1919 (9 and 10 Geo. V., c. 94), for the election of sixteen persons to be members of the General Nursing Council for England and Wales, and laid before Parliament on the 13th day of February, 1923, may be modified as follows:—

(Here follow the modifications proposed.)

This scheme has to be submitted to the House in prescribed form. The curious thing is that the election has been held although the scheme has never been submitted to the House of Commons, and the reason is this, that although the General Nursing Council has had three years in which to prepare its scheme and present it to the Minister of Health for his approval, it has allowed these three years to elapse. A considerable period was occupied last year by a strike on the part of a majority of the members of the General Nursing Council. We in this House are accustomed to minorities, whether in the House or in Committee, going on strike temporarily, but I do not think there has been any previous case in which a large majority of a Council such as this have refused to function because they cannot get on with the minority. The result was that through no fault of the Minister of Health, the election had to take place without the scheme having been submitted to the two Houses of Parliament.

The notice on the Order Paper is a most portentous thing, but I am glad to say that there are only three Amendments of substance and they are capable of being briefly explained. The first deals with the qualifications of the people who represent the registered nurses on the Council. I shall be within the recollection of the House, at any rate of those hon. Members who were Members of the House four years ago, when I say that in the debates on the question of nurses' registration two points received very great stress. One was, that nurses were to be raised to the status of a profession, and the second was that they were to be independent in the choice of their representatives. Again and again speakers pointed out the desirability of registered nurses being free to choose their own representatives without dictation from the Matrons. I do not wish to say a word against the Matrons as Matrons. They are a very admirable body, and a very distinguished body of women. I do not want to disfranchise them, and I do not want to deprive them of the privilege of being elected members of the General Nursing Council, but I do want to point out to the House that this scheme, for which the approval of the House is asked, requires that six of eleven representatives of the registered nurses shall be past or present Matrons. That is not in consonance with the wishes of the House of Commons. It is all very well to say that these ladies shall be entitled to be elected if the nurses want to elect them. Of course they ought to be, and they have a very good chance of being elected. Any Matron who knows her business, and has been a good Matron, has a better chance of election to the Council than a registered nurse who has not had the same oppor-

tunity of advertisement. Why six out of eleven representatives of the registered nurses should be past or present Matrons I fail to see. There is nothing whatever to prevent the other five from being Matrons of hospitals not having training schools. In other words, under the scheme as it stands six of the representatives must be past or present Matrons and the other five may be. The amendment I put forward is that the registered nurses should elect eleven nurses to represent them, and they may be Matrons or not exactly as the nurses please. If the House adopts that suggestion it will be following a precedent set in Scotland.

The second point is the amount of time to be given for the voting papers to be sent out. Voting papers according to these rules have to be sent out seven days before polling day. That is far too short a period. I am suggesting 21 days. The returning officer found it necessary at the last election to extend the period to 14 days, though he had no authority from the Minister of Health to do it. The only other Amendment of substance deals with the powers of the returning officer. A very remarkable Clause enables the returning officer if he makes a mistake, to sit in judgment on his own case, and decide that the work was well done, and that the error or informality does not invalidate the election. There is no reason for giving this power to the returning officer, especially when he himself is the person whose mistakes are to be excused. Bad mistakes were made at the recent election. One was that the secrecy of the ballot was violated. Voting papers were sent out with a space for the nurse's registered number, and when I asked a question in the House of Commons the ballot papers were withdrawn and a new election was held at a cost of some hundreds of pounds. This is the last opportunity of bringing this scheme before the House. I realise the difficulties which my right hon. Friend must have in dealing with this matter, because he is fresh to his important office, and although he has tackled its difficulties with characteristic courage and ability it is rather hard on him to ask him to accept these Amendments *en bloc* and without consulting the General Nursing Council. On the other hand, the Registered Nurses' Parliamentary Council does not want to see these Rules, which it considers thoroughly bad, made a precedent. I would like to have some assurance from my right hon. Friend as regards the future. I do not care about the past, for the Council has been elected for five years under these Rules, bad as they are. I do not want the revision of these Rules to wait for five years. If we can have an assurance from my right hon. Friend that the General Nursing Council will have these Amendments, which I venture to think are reasonable, brought to their notice, and that they will be asked within, say, six months, or at any rate within twelve months, to consider these Amendments and put forward their prescribed scheme for the next election, that, I think, would go a long way to meet an undoubted grievance.

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