MEMBERS of the Royal College of Nursing must admit to belonging to the most democratic trades union in the country. Between February and November of this year, they will all have been given the opportunity of voting for various policy changes. On two of the issues, the vote has been, or will be, either postal or vote in person, while the third event — voting for members of the Rcn council — is postal only.

The first event, of course, was the extraordinary general meeting at the end of February on the motion to change rule 12, which could have permitted limited industrial action, on advice from the College council. This time, members are preparing to vote on the proposal to affiliate to the Trades Union Congress.

A rather curious approach is being taken by the council — a repeat of February’s meeting. Although the council’s resolution is put in positive terms to join the TUC, I am advised that it is only put in that way to allow a vote to take place. The council has no personal view to express. I say it is curious because any other organisation I know has an expressed opinion on almost every issue it debates.

The Rcn itself is not averse, on occasions, to making positive statements, such as that standards of patient care are falling. I often ask: from what level are they falling, to what? Be that as it may, on the major issue affecting the profession as a whole (that is, limited industrial action) or the Rcn in particular (TUC affiliation), there is silence from the council.

“It is up to the members to decide,” it is often said. How I wish that, on some of the major issues, nurses sitting at national level would be courageous and say how they would recommend, even if it is a personal view. Does the council, as a body of elected nurses, want affiliation with the TUC or not? Other union executives are not nearly so bashful. It may just be that the effects of this neutral stand by the council produces the apathy in the membership as demonstrated by a low vote.

What are the advantages to the nursing profession of joining this large influential body? I suppose the greatest advantage is to be seen to be closely identified with the major body representing working people in the country and its constituent unions. Another reason could be that all Health Service unions would be able to work in harmony with each other against the common enemies — that is, the Government (especially if it is Conservative) and management.

Some nurses holding management positions do not see themselves as union members as other nurses do. The reason may be that all area health authorities, have to initiate action not always seen as in the immediate interests of the nurses at the bedside. At times, this can be seen as...