



by Arthur B. Johns, P.Eng.

Yogi Berra, who was a great showman as well as a great catcher, is renowned for his quotations. Two of my favourites are: "It's like déjà-vu all over again" and "When you reach a fork in the road—take it."

Well, part of what I have to say may be like déjà-vu all over again for some of you, and speaking of "a fork in the road"—our profession has taken "it." PEO is now redefined solely as the regulatory body while OSPE (Ontario Society of Professional Engineers) now focuses on member services and the "winning of hearts and minds to our profession's position and issues." That is advocacy.

Although it is a fork in the road, we must not forget it's still the same path. We are all on the same journey headed for the same destination; I get concerned when associated groups head off in different directions even with the best of intentions. Without constant integration, that can, and often does, lead to power trips and self-serving agendas, which in my experience never result in the greatest collective success.

For these organizations to successfully represent all professional engineers, but in quite different activities, there must be a mutually accepted common bond. I do not mean a common vision. I'm referring to a core value. Core values are made of very basic stuff, but, once chosen, they are sacrosanct and not to be taken lightly.

The public is dismayed by the outrageous activities of some public companies and now holds contempt for those associated with these firms. There is a real public distrust, which has been created by the likes of Enron, Worldcom, Adelphia and

Putting public welfare first

On November 15, 2002, Arthur B. Johns, P.Eng., was awarded the Ontario Professional Engineers Gold Medal for his contributions to the engineering profession and society. The Gold Medal is the profession's premiere award, recognizing commitment to public service, technical excellence and outstanding professional leadership. Here is his acceptance speech, which comments on how the public views the profession, how engineers view it, and the part all engineers should play in raising the awareness of the general public of what engineers do.

Tyco, and our very own made-in-Canada examples—Thompson Kernaghan, Livent and Bre-X—just to name a few. This has certainly put a different light, a spotlight, on the accounting profession, which failed to recognize the obvious conflict of interest in auditing books while at the same time providing consulting advice to the same clients (who just may have been in the business of corporate looting).

But what is the public's opinion regarding engineers? OSPE completed a survey in which, among other things, the public was asked to rank several well-known professions in regard to respect. When I first read that, I wondered if they had included the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin's entreaty in the poll: "R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what it means to me."

Well, OSPE did find out and engineers came third, virtually tied for second with pharmacists, behind the #1 medical doctors. Accountants were second to last and lawyers dead last. Curiously, I wonder if they had ranked these professions in terms of compensation, would it have been different? Needless to say that engineers would not be tied for second. I suspect we would be close to last, proving that remuneration is not necessarily directly proportional to respect.

Another question put to the same audience was: "What do engineers do?" Well,

the answers to that are very revealing. The public does not seem to know what engineers do.

So, how can the public have respect for engineers, if they don't know what engineers do? Well, one answer is that they respect engineers as people: people they have as friends or relatives, or have worked with in their community, churches and charities. The respect exists because most engineers are really decent folks and possibly that's part of our image.

If we can find a joke about engineers, engineers always come across as decent folks. On the other hand, one has no trouble finding lawyers' jokes and they are always put-downs. I know several lawyers and all seem to celebrate the jokes about them. It has become part of their image.

The Association of Consulting Engineers of Canada (ACEC) has as its top two priority objectives, "image" and "remuneration." I'm not sure what image they are striving for. Will it be the "decent folks" image; or perhaps we will know we have made it in the image game when there are lots of negative jokes about us?

PEO has as part of its goals for the future "where members take pride in belonging to a highly respected profession." There's that "respect" word again. Being a future goal, this seems to suggest that either

members are not yet taking pride in belonging, or our profession is not yet highly respected but the vision is to be there some day. Personally, I'd prefer the goal to be "where members take pride in themselves and respect one another."

So, let's get back to this common bond/core value thing. It has to address the public, which respects us but doesn't know what we do.

So what would the public believe? I submit that, for professional engineers and their associations, it should be: "Our paramount duty is to public welfare." It's in our Code of Ethics, which is in the regulations of the *Professional Engineers Act*. So, let's dust it off, display it and share it with the public. It is already respected by engineers but is rarely, if ever, expressed as a core value and is virtually unknown to the public. Let's display it in the reception rooms, Council chamber, chapters and boardrooms of PEO, OSPE and CEO, the Consulting Engineers of Ontario, as a constant reminder. Let's put it up there on that big screen at the next awards dinner. There it is, people: In everything we do, "Our paramount duty is to public welfare." And it is not just the para-

mount duty of individual licensed professional engineers, it is also the paramount duty of the organizations that represent them and regulate them.

How can a profession that claims its paramount duty is to public welfare, have a public that has little knowledge of what we do and is oblivious to the fact that we put their welfare first?

Perhaps it all goes back to the ancient notion that we are the "invisible profession." It's inherent in the "Sons of Martha" image created by Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same name. Some of our leaders actually cherished that image. Some might still be hard-wired to it. But is there ever an image if you are invisible? Well, I suppose if you do not want to be accountable or attract attention, what better way than to be invisible. But increased remuneration does not come from being invisible.

Perhaps it is because there has been a trend away from the "E" word—engineering. We've been advised to promote management services over engineering services because we get better fees if it is called management. Today it is "science and technology" that one hears rather than

"engineering"; but, still, virtually every example of science and technology is about engineering. The best definition of an engineer I know is by Von Karman. He said: "Scientists explore that which has always been; engineers create that which has never been."

It's no wonder the public is confused about what engineers do when it's become trendy to not use the "E" word.

But as Yogi said: "The future ain't what it used to be." By taking that fork in the road, OSPE and PEO are dealing with the future and there is a clear groundswell of enthusiasm for change. Change will not happen quickly, but it must happen. It will take lots of money and some outside help, but the returns from that investment will be great.

The public wants professionals it can trust. What better profession to trust than one that puts your welfare ahead of all others.

But without the involvement and the contribution of every engineer, it just might not happen. Yogi said: "You can observe a lot just by watching." Members must stop observing and watching and get serious about supporting OSPE, the organization promoting our profession's positions and issues. Every time an engineer speaks to the public, it should be looked upon as an opportunity to enhance the public regard for the profession of engineering. In fact, it might even be a breach of the code of ethics if we do not enhance public regard. At this point of my presentation, I have used the "E" word 25 times. Let's all use it more often.

A part of what we do is "show business." We have to show the public our business and our business is engineering. And let's loosen up and have some fun doing it. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, it's show time. What's our show, you ask?

You're sitting in it; you just ate it; you were entertained by it; you drove in it. You may have flown here in it; you ride in it; you surf on it; you get well in it; you wear it; you listen to it and talk into it; you drink it and you breathe it. It's everywhere you live. The show is called Canadian Engineering, Eh! starring the best engineers in the world. ❖



Arthur B. Johns, P.Eng., accepts the Ontario Professional Engineers Gold Medal award from Catherine Karakatsanis, P.Eng., M.E.Sc., OSPE Chair and President, and Principal, Morrison Hershfield.