

# WE, THE ENGINEERS OF ONTARIO, HAVE A SERIOUS PROBLEM

By Diane Freeman, P.Eng., FEC, and Chris D. Roney, P.Eng., BDS, FEC

OUR CURRENT system of electing the president has, far too frequently, resulted in presidents who were ineffective, ill-prepared, out-of-touch or ill-informed. Though we have no doubt that all were well meaning, putting the wrong person into this important role results in **harm to the reputation, stature and advancement of our profession**. Though we have had some truly fantastic presidents over the years, far too many times we have failed to elect an effective president—we can't afford to let that happen.

One of the most important roles is to be the face and voice of the profession to the public, the government, universities and other external stakeholders. How we are perceived as a profession often comes down, in large part, to the ability and credibility of our leaders. It takes years of effort to build relationships and develop trust, respect and goodwill with those we hope to influence and impress, but all that is **lost in an instant** when we put forward a weak, ineffective, or out-of-touch president as our spokesperson. **We can't afford to keep doing this.**

**Our current system of electing the president is misleading**, both for the candidates and for the members. Often we see candidates for president run on a platform of grand promises. Our members make their decision regarding whom to support based on those promises, unaware that **the president is but one vote**

around the council table. **The president does not have special powers or authority** to advance his or her own agenda or policies. Instead, the authority for determining the policies and strategic direction of our profession is established by the collective wisdom of the entire council of 29 men and women.

More often than not, **the presidents themselves do not understand their role**. They believe they have a mandate (even though, due to our typically low voter turnout, a successful presidential candidate typically garners only about 8 per cent support of the membership). Some think they can push that mandate through without bothering to get council on-board, and this inevitably leads to conflict. This has happened many times and the result is a virtual paralysis of council. This is **preventing our profession from dealing with the important strategic issues** facing our members. Our profession's role, authority and stature in society are eroding as a result. It is counter-productive, **it damages our profession**, and it must be stopped.

We live in the engineering-driven technology age—engineering touches our society in more ways than ever before; so ask yourself: Why doesn't the engineering profession have a stature in society greater than others, such as medicine and law? Why are engineering services and expertise treated like a commodity to be

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bought and sold at the lowest price? Though there are many reasons, with no simple answers, we mostly have ourselves to blame. It takes effective strategic direction, leadership and image. **We can't afford to keep doing things the way we've done them since 1922—the status quo isn't working.**

What you are being asked to vote on is to change to a system where the council will **elect the president from among the elected councillors**. This does not in any way diminish your democratic rights to elect your leadership—on the contrary, **it improves the quality of the democratic governance of our profession.**

You will still have the **same number of elected members of council** and **the president will still be an individual who was elected by the members.**

This is a well-established and successful democratic model that is widely used. It has been highly recommended to us by experts in the field as **the gold standard for effective governance**—PEO deserves no less! In fact, all of the other regulatory bodies in Ontario that report to the attorney general select their president (or equivalent) in this manner. It ensures the president has the confidence of the council and must earn and maintain that respect by acting fairly and responsibly. Council is in a far better position to know whether the individual it selects has the vitally important skills and attributes necessary to effectively represent the profession to the government, universities, and other important external stakeholders, as well as to our own members.

So please, for the sake of our profession, I urge you to **vote for council appointing the president from among the elected members of council.** ☒

For more information, please visit the following website: [www.cises.ca](http://www.cises.ca). Σ

# MEMBERS OF A MATURE, SELF-REGULATED PROFESSION ARE CAPABLE OF ELECTING THEIR OWN PRESIDENT

*By Denis Dixon, P.Eng., FEC, and Roydon A. Fraser, PhD, P.Eng., FEC*

SINCE 1922, Ontario's professional engineers have elected their top officers and the majority of their council. It's tradition, basic democracy, and a clear and strong form of *self-regulation*. It has served the public and PEO members exceedingly well. And a scan of our sister professional engineering associations across Canada reveals that having members directly elect the president is the *engineering way*.

*Direct* election of our officials allows the membership to express their preferences and desires. Furthermore, when members elect the president it improves significantly the flow of ideas and suggested initiatives from members to PEO council. An appointed president could not be dislodged by a democratic vote by the members. Direct election requires candidates to lay out their platform prior to election and, if they renege or perform poorly, they

can be rebuked in the next election. An appointed president could ignore criticism, claiming his or her policies are best for the masses likely to be phrased as being best for the profession.

What about "new blood"? Direct election allows candidates from among 75,000 PEO members, including dedicated committee and chapter leaders. Appointment from within council's 17 elected members taps a very small pool, and is likely to preserve orthodoxy, especially when one considers that the pool of possible council-elected presidents will likely be even smaller, given many councillors will likely not have the additional time available to accept the increased responsibilities of the presidency.

When the president is elected by the *members*, not appointed by the council, he or she is not subject to pressure from cliques or factions on council, making

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it harder to centralize and concentrate power there. Members electing the president limits power centralization. And do not forget that our council is already perilously close to losing *self-regulation* with more than one-third (41 per cent or 12 of 29) of councillors appointed by government.

*Strong self-regulation* requires that members elect the president. A strong self-governed engineering profession must be defended. The erosion of self-governance is often slow, but once lost it is virtually impossible to re-acquire. Σ