

INTERNS GAIN EARLY EXPOSURE TO POLICY-MAKING

By Marisa Sterling, P.Eng.



Back row, from left: Kim Hokan; Howard Brown, president, Brown & Cohen Communications & Public Affairs Inc.; Waqas Iqbal; Tejas Aivalli; Donald Wallace, PhD, executive director, Ontario Centre for Engineering and Public Policy; Marisa Sterling, P.Eng., PEO chapter coordinator; Emma Stanley-Cochrane; Igor Delov; Meghan Buckham; Chelsea Peet; and Johnny Zuccon, P.Eng., PEO deputy registrar, standards and tribunals. Front row, from left: Henry Jacek, PhD, political science professor, McMaster University; Angela Hersey; David Donovan; and Rosanne Waters.

EACH YEAR, a handful of recent university graduates gain valuable exposure to Ontario's governance and policy-making machinery thanks to a unique legislative internship program.

Now in its 36th year of operation, the Ontario Legislative Internship Programme (OLIP) allows groups of 10 students to learn how the province is governed and how the legislature works. To get a balanced picture of the process, interns work alongside both government and opposition members of provincial parliament (MPPs).

Over its history, the program has turned out a number of graduates eager to make a contribution to policy-making for the greater public good.

Many program participants have served as legislative pages in their secondary school days, and history suggests some interns may be poised to make an impact in the public and private sectors as their careers unfold. For example, prominent positions held by OLIP alumni include chief of staff to the prime minister's office, elected MPPs, senior policy advisors to many ministries and the premier of

Ontario, and public affairs consultants to major corporations.

So how much does this next generation of public leaders know about engineers and our profession? On May 15, PEO invited interns to sit in the room where PEO governance takes place—the council chambers—to learn their thoughts about how engineers and the political process could be more intertwined.

When asked which self-regulated profession in Ontario had the most members—lawyers or engineers—the interns answered lawyers, and the collective spirit of PEO sagged with the response.

Herein lies an opportunity for engineers. As almost the largest self-governed profession in Ontario, the number of licensed engineers is more than double the number of lawyers. Engineers are well respected and are involved in various sectors, yet are seen as the “quiet profession,” far from the public eye.

Earlier this year, I encouraged PEO to become an OLIP sponsor to further its engagement in the political process and to learn from those who are closest to it. And PEO has taken this opportunity to relay a key message to these leaders of tomorrow: When you embark on your career, we want you to remember engineers.

As a former legislative page, I believe in diversity of experiences to encourage learning and growth and to develop one's potential to contribute to society through the political process.

At the Ontario Centre for Engineering and Public Policy's recent conference, Amit Chakma, PhD, P.Eng., incoming president, University of Western Ontario, spoke about the value of integrative thinkers, whom he defined as global citizens with knowledge of history and a firm understanding of technology and culture.

At the May 15 meeting at PEO, the legislative interns recognized the value of instilling public service as a core value for engineers. Instead of stand-alone courses in social science and public policy, they suggested engineering education be augmented to weave these components throughout the curriculum. They also cited the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario as a regulator that works to develop political engagement in its young professionals.

Since 2005, PEO's Government Liaison Program (GLP) has mobilized engineers in the chapter system to become engaged with their local MPPs.

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Hoping to harness the breadth of technical knowledge within the engineering profession, the GLP's initial emphasis has been on developing strong communication skills. Being able to work collaboratively with communications professionals to deliver information in digestible, marketable bites is an essential skill in communicating with parliamentarians.

Although engineers have knowledge to share on a wide variety of issues, governments have generally been slow to consult with the profession when reviewing legislation or developing new policy. Engineers, therefore, need to initiate the communication and tell elected officials and policy-makers when they have information that may be of value.

The bureaucratic process can be complex and potentially discouraging to engineers who might prefer to work in a more structured environment. But to be on the inside of parliament and to have contact with someone in government is seen as the best way to influence policy.

At present, there are few examples of engineers who have direct influence on policy-making in Ontario. Only two engineers sit in the provincial legislature (Phil McNeely, P.Eng., parliamentary assistant to the minister of energy and infrastructure, Ottawa-Orléans; and Norman Sterling, P.Eng., Carleton-Mississippi Mills), and no engineers serve as deputy ministers in the civil service.

It's important to consider the value engineers can bring to the political arena. Engineers possess the qualities of successful members of parliament. They can advocate for community constituents like their local hospitals or school boards. They can take up social causes in their communities and be passionate about issues. Engineers can also bring a longer-term, technologically nuanced perspective on pressing social issues, rather than focusing on the next election, as is often the case with elected officials.

PEO appreciated the thoughtful discussions that ensued with the interns as a result of our sponsorship. They left with a better understanding of the regulatory powers of a self-governed body and the social issues that engineers touch in their work every day, and an appreciation of engineers' desires to expand their skill sets to become key government leaders of tomorrow. Σ

DID YOU KNOW?

Effective June 1, 2008, licence holders looking to reinstate their licences are subject to new rules under Regulation 941.

If you have resigned your licence or it has been cancelled for nonpayment of fees, there is a new graduated reinstatement system in place. Fees and obligations increase based on the length of time your licence has been cancelled.

For full details, see *Reinstatement Requirement—An Informative Guide* under *Fee Policies* in the Fees & Records section of www.peo.on.ca.

