

THE SCATTERED ARMY OF 73,000 ENGINEERS

In support of PEO's goal of having 11 engineers in the 2011 legislature, we have invited elected officials, past and present, to share their views on how the aspiring politicians among licence holders can become more engaged in the political process. The first instalment in this series of articles was submitted by Tim Reid, former Scarborough East MPP and former president of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

By Tim Reid

DEMOCRACY THRIVES ON political activism. Some groups understand this and have been active for decades developing policy proposals, meeting with MPPs and cabinet ministers, and providing stories or "think pieces" to the media. Engineers, with their professional expertise, would be a welcome influence in balancing established views and interests already deeply embedded in the political process.

There are two approaches to political activism for a professional group. The first is traditional lobbying to put specific interests forward to those in government. The second is to get personally involved in the process of politics at the local community level—to contribute time and effort to political parties. The latter is important as it can make the first approach more effective.

My experience as president of the chamber of commerce for a decade is relevant in relation to local groups or chapters of engineers, in mobilizing your political activism.

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce has members in cities and towns across Canada who are drawn together in community chambers of commerce. For decades, the national Canadian Chamber of Commerce has encouraged them to become active volunteers in all political parties at the local level.

As individual business people, many chamber members join their local political party riding asso-

ciations. Some volunteer to help out in their sitting MPP's riding office, which services the needs of constituents. This "on-the-street" involvement is personally rewarding, as well as an opportunity to get grounded about politics itself. Other individual chamber members support the riding associations of the political parties that do not have an MPP. They do so by organizing fundraising activities, recruiting new members at small events in their homes to discuss issues, seeking out potential candidates (engineers!) to run in the next election, and laying the ground work for that election. Some become leaders in these riding associations.

Each local chamber, as an organization, lobbies its MPP directly. The national chamber supports local chambers by providing professional questionnaires on policy issues for discussion workshops, material for their newsletters, and articles for the weekly newspapers. Even a video on tax issues was prepared, which was sent to all local chambers to give to their community TV cable stations. It was carried extensively (today it would be material for websites, and blogs as well!).

As a result of this kind of political activism, the visibility and reputation of community chambers and their members are enhanced. This could be accomplished for local groups or chapters of engineers as well. An article in the *Globe and Mail* recently had a headline: "How a scattered army of insurance brokers out-muscled the Big Three Banks." The "scattered army of 73,000 engineers" across Ontario, with the support of PEO, could have a strong political impact as well.

I share the deep concerns of Professional Engineers Ontario with the increasing disinterest among many Canadians in running for public office and the fall-off in voting for those who do so.

Your leadership among your own professional peers could be a model for other professional groups, especially your innovative "candidate college" to help prepare engineers for public office. I am certain, as a result of your imaginative efforts, that there will be a dozen more engineers in the Ontario legislature over the next two elections! Σ