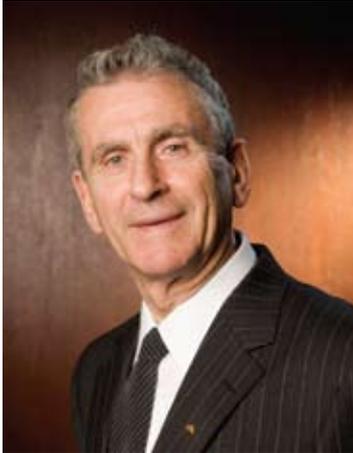


# POLITICS, PEO, PROGRESS?

By Patrick J. Quinn, P.Eng., FEC



**IT IS A STRUGGLE FOR THE VERY SOUL OF OUR PROFESSION AND AGAINST CHANGES THAT, TO USE WINSTON CHURCHILL'S WORDS, UP WITH WHICH WE SHOULD NOT PUT. ANOTHER GREAT PROPONENT OF DEMOCRACY SAID THAT THE PRICE OF FREEDOM IS ETERNAL VIGILANCE. THAT IS WHY YOU SHOULD TAKE AN INTEREST IN YOUR PROFESSION WHILE YOU CAN STILL EXERCISE YOUR RIGHT TO VOTE, AND WHY I OFFER THIS VIEWPOINT.**

AS PART OF the covenant between our profession and government that granted us self-regulation in 1922, an association was formed—PEO—the concept being that this would be governed under a member-directed model. The governing council was an all-elected body, and major policy changes and bylaws were subject to the sober second view of the members by referendum. It has stood the test for almost a century as a unique and beneficial model that has protected the public and enhanced our profession.

Some years ago, there were concerns about the lack of public participation in self-governing bodies and it was decided that the addition of government appointees (LGAs) was merited. A small number were added to the elected members on council. Over the years, LGAs were required on a number of committees. Because the workload was too much for their small number, the numbers were increased and today there are 12 LGAs on our council (seven professional engineers and five non-engineers) and 17 elected councillors. (For comparison, there are only four government appointees on the lawyer's regulatory body.) There are unintended consequences.

In the last couple of years, council's composition has led to a fundamental dichotomy concerning the philosophical basis of our governance and the emergence of a serious challenge to the concept of a member-directed association. While not suggesting any collusion or direction from government, a sizable majority of LGAs favour a council-directed form of association and are opposed to the member's input through referendum, even on such a major fundamental change. By their votes, they have expressed the view that they, through council, should have the last word on our governance.

Yet, it is clear that many members are protective of our tradition of trust in our members to confirm decisions in the best interests of the public. This is part of the spirit of service and dedication that defines us as professionals in the first place, and if this needs to be dictated by council, we have lost the essence of self-governance and professionalism.

Because of this fundamental clash, recent PEO councils have become factionalized, distrustful, at times dysfunctional, and the politics are a serious obstacle to the progress necessary to our profession's well-being. Go to [www.peo.on.ca](http://www.peo.on.ca), click on PEO Council, then on Agenda and Minutes, and then on the audio of the 470th Meeting of Council on May 7 to hear the opening salvo to another year of dissonance on council.

This term of council started with a challenge to the elected president (led by a non-engineer lieutenant governor appointee and concerted lobbying) before the new president conducted any business, which resulted in a 14 to 13 vote that ousted the president, a proponent of a member-directed model, from chairing council meetings, a tradition in place since 1922.

It has to be stated that while the vote was secret, the votes of LGAs were clearly a major part of the majority. Recent voting records show that LGAs voting as a bloc have become of critical significance in the governance of our profession. Their recorded votes were greatly instrumental in the move away from member involvement in bylaw changes, in the move to deny members their traditional role in the election of our president and vice president, and in denying member participation in these decisions by the tradition of member referendum. It is fair to say that some elected members participated

## [ VIEWPOINT ]

in these initiatives and also that those who ran for election on these actions were soundly defeated.

It seems to me that the members realized that what was at stake was the basic tenet of our profession as a self-regulated profession. If government appointees can and do control our council, decide on our leadership, and decide on the directions and rules of our practice, we cannot sustain the reality of self-governance. If council, whatever its composition, has lost trust in the professionalism of our members, we cannot claim to really be a profession.

We also need to consider the use of membership fees of around \$20 million a year for an organization that could, like the state boards in the US, be directly run by the government at

a fraction of the cost and at no threat to public safety. We willingly pay this cost as part of the covenant between our profession and government, and those who ran in the recent elections and asserted in their platforms that council has no moral authority to abrogate this covenant without the agreement of the members in a clearly worded referendum were overwhelmingly elected. When lawyers felt in recent years that their self-governance was being eroded, they offered government the keys to regulation, an offer the government was quick to reject. Our willingness to pay hinges on that part of self-regulation that understands that a healthy engineering profession is not only in the members' interests, but weaves into the societal fabric to enhance the public weal.

The debate on these matters will no doubt continue now and into next year's elections. It is not about indi-

vidual aspects of governance on which members may be persuaded or not. It is about respecting the members and about a council that does not have confidence in their concerns and wisdom and that would unilaterally take away traditions at the core of a member-directed, self-governing profession.

It is a struggle for the very soul of our profession and against changes that, to use Winston Churchill's words, up with which we should not put. Another great proponent of democracy said that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. That is why you should take an interest in your profession while you can still exercise your right to vote, and why I offer this viewpoint. Σ

Pat Quinn is a two-time PEO president (1999-2000, 2006-2007), a former Engineers Canada and Ontario Society of Professional Engineers director and current PEO elected vice president.

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