

LEADERLESS INTO IRRELEVANCY

By Patrick Quinn, PhD (Hon.), P.Eng., FEC

ONE IN 12 “professional” engineers voted in recent elections for the governors of our profession. If engineers find PEO irrelevant, it begs the question of our status with the public.

The fact is many organizations like PEO, conceived almost 100 years ago and empowered by legislation, have failed to renew themselves adequately in a world changing faster than they appear to be able to adapt. Events indicate that PEO, in recent years of internal governance strife, has failed to devote enough of its positive energies to the needs of the times. The submission to the Algo Mall inquiry is a litany of what has been needed, but not done.

Last year, then President Adams, P.Eng., FEC, sought a judicial review, in the face of what he and many others saw as a questionable exercise of council’s power in choosing to accept Michael Hogan’s [PhD, P.Eng.] resignation and not his rescinding of that resignation (an option apparently exercised by an earlier council in the case of a previous councillor), thereby effectively removing from council an elected councillor-at-large. Hogan has paid PEO \$31,000 after he and Adams were held accountable for \$60,000 of PEO’s some \$200,000 costs in fighting the review. Council is now legally pursuing Adams, who has decades of service to PEO, and who has just been elected president-elect for a third time by members fully aware of the action he took on their behalf and who, as the act permits, can and should be indemnified against legal costs for actions taken in good faith on behalf of the association.

A group on council have, in recent years, successfully appropriated power from the office of the president, have taken away the members’ rights to confirm major policies and, because of the voting effects of lieutenant governor appointees (LGAs), have rendered the electoral process impotent. With 12 of 28 voting members on council LGAs, they constitute a bloc, which has, if the rest of council is divided, the balance of power. As part of the appropriation of power, a concept of the president as merely an equal among equals has become a means of blocking the agendas on which presidents run.

Like an orchestra without a conductor, with its musicians playing their individual interpretations of the composer’s score, council has become dissonant and ineffective, and protection of the public and the well-being of the profession have been compromised.

There are realities around 21st century society, professionalism, and regulatory processes that need to be accepted if PEO is to be relevant. At one time, a consulting engineer could and would stop work on a construction site if he or she was dissatisfied, period. Some years ago at a construction site meeting, I raised the issue of a particular site safety shortcoming. The contractor chairing the meeting told me directly to eff off. At the Algo Mall enquiry, we heard how an engineer modified

his report at the “request” of the owner. At the end of the day, power positions triumph in modern business and the engineer today is rarely in a power position. PEO officially recognized this in its submission to the Algo Mall inquiry, where it seeks additional regulations to redress this imbalance.

PEO, as a regulator, is impotent against many traits in the business world of engineering, as was/is the Ordre des ingénieurs du Québec (OIQ), where widespread corruption has been found in our profession. It is questionable if professional regulation can ever eradicate criminal activity, although the OIQ is suggesting act changes to promote more ethical behaviour.

But having a leadership voice is still a powerful instrument for change, and that is why leadership, which is not a group talent, depends so much on individuals with ideals, vision, integrity and conviction. Change or transformation comes from individual leadership. John Steinbeck, a great student of the human condition, said it simply. Modified slightly for our time, he wrote: “Our species is the only creative species, and it only has one creative instrument, the individual mind and spirit of a *person*. Nothing was ever created by two *persons*. There are no good collaborations, whether in music, in art, in poetry, in mathematics, in philosophy. Once the miracle of creation has taken place, the group can build and extend it, but the group never invents anything. The preciousness lies in the lonely mind.”

When council rejects the leadership of an elected president, it loses the preciousness that can transform our regulatory process in a changed world, and it condemns us to a struggle for power that negates the possibility of transformation. If self-regulation means the membership empowers by election, the usurping of that leadership, that authority, particularly by government appointees, is destructive of self-regulation and bound to ensure our further loss of power in society and irrelevance to our members. Reality, like leadership, has to be recognized and accepted.

In an era where self-regulation is not seen as altruism and, where to continue, PEO will be judged on its performance in protecting the public, the throttling of leadership and the lack of effective governance can no longer be ignored. PEO is already eleven-twelfths of the way to permanent irrelevancy. The public and our profession deserve more. Σ

Patrick Quinn, PhD (Hon.), P.Eng., FEC, is a two-time PEO president.