

ENGINEERS AS POLITICIANS: IT'S IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

By Howard Brown and Kaitlynn Dodge

FOR THE LAST NUMBER OF YEARS, Professional Engineers Ontario has been encouraging engineers to become more involved in politics through its Government Liaison Program and through the Ontario Centre for Engineering and Public Policy, because there is a shortage of engineers and people with science and technology backgrounds in the legislature.

The project, which started as an aspirational concept to have 11 engineers elected in 2011, has driven a growing conversation in the engineering community about why it's important for the members of the profession to use their skills in public office.

With four professional engineers elected to Canada's House of Commons (MPs Corneliu Chisu, P.Eng., FEC, Marc Garneau, P.Eng., Pierre Lemieux, P.Eng., and Steven Blaney, P.Eng.) and three who have seats in Queen's Park (MPPs Phil McNeely, P.Eng., Jack MacLaren, P.Eng., and Jim McDonnell, P.Eng.), there is room for more engineers to step up to the plate. Sadly, one of the engineers at Queen's Park, MPP McNeely (Ottawa-Orléans), has announced his plans to retire when the next election is called.

PEO's Mississauga Chapter recently hosted a well-attended event for licence holders, entitled Engineers as Politicians. The session was designed to give engineers who are currently elected or who have previously run for election an opportunity to share their experiences.

One of the speakers was the House of Commons' most recently elected engineer, former PEO vice president and Pickering-Scarborough East MP Corneliu Chisu.

"I always believed that if you would like to change the world, then you need to be an engineer," Chisu told seminar attendees.

"As we seek to develop our country and to ensure our people's well-being in an increasingly complex and interdependent world, I truly believe that engineers will need to play a greater role, not merely in designing and constructing tangible products, processes and structures, but also in promoting a culture of quality, sustainability, ethical standards and use of their practical knowledge to help governments understand choices and the most effective means to get things done."

Chisu's passion for the subject was evident. He wants to see more engineers playing a public role.

You could argue that the primary function of the House of Commons is in drafting laws, and those with legal backgrounds are best suited to serve. However, Chisu believes there

is a strong argument for individuals with an engineering background to tackle pressing environmental issues, understand and address infrastructure needs, revive the domestic manufacturing sector, and more. These all require the technical expertise and savvy problem solving of the engineering mind.

"This is why it is crucial that engineers be involved in government—to provide experienced counsel on issues that are critical to the well-being and health of our nation and its future," Chisu said.

Former Mississauga-Erindale MP Omar Alghabra, P.Eng., also participated in the session and shared some of the things he learned while in public office. Quoting Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion, Alghabra simplified the political system, saying: "The feds have the money, the province has the authority, and municipalities have the responsibility." He reflected on his time growing up in the Middle East. He said he understood the importance of getting involved politically after moving to Canada as a teenager from a country with limited political freedom.

Mississauga City Councillor Ron Starr, P.Eng., shed light on why he decided to run, putting weight on contributing his engineering thought process in politics to make a difference. After serving many years ago, Starr said he ran again for three reasons. He said he wanted to "bring civility back" to politics, "address gridlock" and "show value for taxpayers."

Two engineers who ran among the 11 P.Eng. MPP candidates in 2011 shared some words of wisdom to engineers looking to get involved.

Former Richmond Hill NDP candidate Adam DeVita, P.Eng., said: "You should be involved in politics because it is important and meaningful."

Former Toronto-Danforth provincial Liberal candidate Marisa Sterling, P.Eng., who is also PEO's lead on the industrial exception repeal, encouraged participants to take action: "Donate a dollar or even \$5 to a political cause; write about something that you care about and back it up with why it's important." Sterling was a page in the Ontario legislature when she was in grade 8, and credits this early exposure with getting her engaged in the political process.

Of those who participated in the seminar, 84 per cent said that they would "think about getting more involved, will find a way to get more involved, or can't wait to get more involved." Three issues were most important to participants: public transit (63 per cent), energy (57 per cent) and the environment (43 per cent). Thirty-two per cent of participants were 35 years old or younger.

It's clear with numbers like these that the future of engineers in politics is bright. Σ

Howard Brown is president, and Kaitlynn Dodge is account director, Brown & Cohen Communications & Public Affairs Inc.