

## ELECTING ENGINEERS: A MATTER OF IMPORTANCE

By Howard Brown and Kaitlynn Dodge

THERE ARE MANY ways to engage with government.

PEO stays on the radar by mobilizing engineers across the province through its Government Liaison Program. The program encourages strong, mutually beneficial relationships between members of provincial parliament (MPPs) and professional engineers, and helps to keep regulatory issues on the agenda.

While contributing as professional partners to government is important, another way to engage with even more impact is to run for and hold elected office.

We need more P.Engs to play a role in elected office if the profession truly wants to improve public safety and the well-being of Ontarians.

As of August 2014, of the 107 MPPs, only two are engineers: Jack MacLaren, P.Eng., MPP (Carleton-Mississippi Mills), and Jim McDonnell, P.Eng., MPP (Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry).

At the federal level, where the number of members of parliament (MPs) is triple that of MPPs in Ontario, only four are professional engineers: Corneliu Chisu, P.Eng., MP (Pickering-Scarborough East), Marc Garneau, P.Eng., MP (Westmount-Ville-Marie), Pierre Lemieux, P.Eng., MP (Glengarry-Prescott-Russell), and Steven Blaney, ing., MP (Levis-Bellechasse).

The number of professional engineers in parliament is low when compared to lawyers and business people, even though engineers have skills that make them perfectly suited to lead in policy.

Engineers are trained to examine issues scientifically and critically, and are able to break down complicated issues using evidence-based decision-making and problem-solving skills. Parliament needs more individuals with these abilities to create thoughtful, practical policies that benefit the public interest.

Often seen as the silent profession, many engineers have a difficult time seeing their potential as policy-makers with a voice to contribute at the beginning of the process. They view their role as technical experts brought in to recommend solutions once the constraints and parameters are set.

What would be most valuable, however, is to have engineers present at the beginning of the policy process when the scope of the problem is being defined.

In Ontario, for example, the government is heavily focused on introducing new technologies to revitalize the energy and manufacturing sectors. This is a great example of the types of initiatives that would benefit from consulting with engineers

early in the process, to ensure solutions are developed that are prudent for the challenges at hand.

In a 2011 *Engineering Dimensions* article (“PEO now firmly on government radar,” May/June, p. 34), Minister of Aboriginal Affairs David Zimmer, MPP (Willowdale), remarked that when first meeting with engineers after being elected he “made the observation that PEO and engineering was the quiet profession in Ontario. I had heard loudly from the lawyers, and I heard from the accountants and the architects, but I had heard nothing from the engineers.”

He added that, at the time, “there was talk about renewal of the province’s economy and renewal of the province’s governance structure and other issues that engineers should be involved in, but it was my sense that they weren’t.”

While this has improved over the years, engineers must lend their knowledge, advice and expertise to finding the most suitable technologies for the long term that are also cost-effective and practical for Ontario’s unique environment.

Infrastructure is another area that benefits from the work of engineers. Bringing engineers in early in the process during, for example, the development of specifications can save the government money and ensure the appropriate parameters are set.

**WE NEED MORE P.ENGs TO PLAY A ROLE IN ELECTED OFFICE IF THE PROFESSION TRULY WANTS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC SAFETY AND THE WELL-BEING OF ONTARIANS.**

As we tackle complex challenges with many moving pieces, having more engineers around the cabinet table and on committees would make a considerable impact.

Engineering and public affairs go hand in hand. Whether it is regarding regulatory issues, which is PEO’s focus, or public policy issues having an impact on the strategic direction of energy, the environment and infrastructure in Ontario, engineers have a role to play in solving the problems that Ontarians face.

MPP Garneau said, “The decisions that politicians make affect people’s lives and they need to be based on science and fact, not dogma and ideology.”

Including engineering principles in decision making is a proven way to do just that.

As a regulator, PEO plays an important role in protecting public safety. Engineers have a duty and the tools to do the same, and it’s about time they did it from elected office. Σ

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