

## Message from the Chair



town Toronto.

The theme of the two-day meeting was engineering and public policy.

Our luncheon speaker Bob Rae effectively addressed the issue and stressed the fact that government needs engineers and their creativity to solve problems. The former Ontario premier and present federal Liberal candidate emphasized on the deteriorating infrastructure and the need for urgent repairs: "The government always needs you, the engineers, whether it is for construction of new facilities or for the fight against global warming."

While government needs engineers for effectively solving various problems our communities are facing, according to Rae, the governments were feeling the pinch in their budgets. Increases in healthcare costs are literally eating away other budgets effectively postponing repairs or forcing the development of more efficient rehabilitation methods.

Rae called on closing the gap between policy makers and the engineering profession. He urged the full participation of engineers in political life and encouraged us to run for public office. He said we should close the

gap between what we think and what we say, and between what we say and what we do.

I believe as engineers we are more doers than sayers and I agree the gaps should be closed.

In all, I was very impressed and encouraged by Rae's speech. It is good to hear from a respectable political leader that engineers have important roles to play in government and policy making.

Nevertheless, as the role of the engineer becomes increasing important, it is somehow worrying that the percentage of university students graduating from engineering school is low compared to other countries: South Korea (38%), France (47%), China (50%), and Singapore (67%). Meanwhile, a mere 15% of Canadian and U.S. students graduate with a degree in engineering.

What do you think we should do? Is there enough work for new graduates to encourage them to major in engineering? Should we convince the government to use more engineers in various government departments? How can we encourage more undergraduates to pursue engineering? What is the impact of this situation on our economy?

It is something worth giving serious thought to. Let us hear from you.

Regards

Noubar Takessian, P.Eng.  
Chair, Willowdale-Thornhill PEO Chapter

## Public Awareness Wanted!

# Improving the image of engineers

By Changiz Sadr, P.Eng.

I received a few responses to my article about engineering public awareness that was published in the last edition of The Chronicle. I must admit that I expected a greater number of responses with solutions and new ideas as to how we can improve public awareness of the engineering profession. Amongst those few responses, there was one with some useful insights and comments, along with some personal experiences of the author. I was lucky enough to meet and talk with him in person at the annual general meeting of the Willowdale-Thornhill chapter of the Professional Engineers Ontario on March 6th.

PEO held its own AGM and Public Policy and Engineering conference on April 27th and 28th, along with the Engineering Award Gala on the Friday night. I was delighted to be able to attend and represent the Willowdale-Thornhill chapter. It was interesting to learn about the different programs and activities that are available for getting engineers involved with the public policy decision making process, and to allow them to meet with the public policy decision makers.

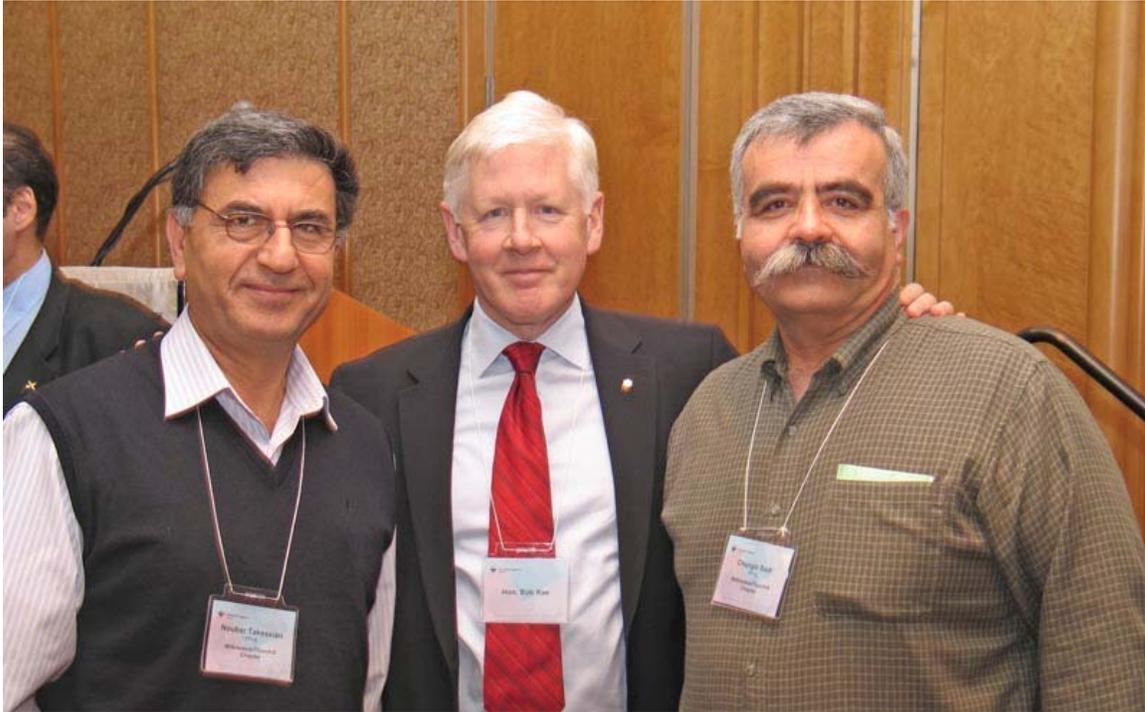
Different speakers from the University of Toronto, McMaster University in Hamilton, along with a few former members of Provincial Parliament spoke at the conference; the luncheon guest speaker was Hon. Bob Rae. All the speeches were very promising for all engineers and for the future of engineering. However, it was interesting that most of the speakers were not engineers, or if they were, they were not licensed as professional engineers. This made me wonder how they could perform such important tasks in the profession without even having a complete view of engineering and being aware of current issues facing the profession.

One of the speakers mentioned the water quality disaster in Walkerton, Ontario, of the past decade and the recent subway incident that resulted in the death of a Toronto Transit Commission worker and left two injured. The last speaker of the day spoke about his high school physics teacher who did not have a science background. The speaker said he failed that subject because he had to learn it from a non-scientific view, without learning about the history or scientific roots of the matter. Is this not similar to what we face today with public disasters that could have been prevented with the ingenuity of engineers? Given that, the non-engineer public policy decision maker is beginning to look like the non-science teacher teaching physics.

Rae's speech was also interesting. The focus of his talk was a question he posed asking who can do the job if not us engineers. This is a very important message for all of us coming from a former premier, and an experienced politician, who knows all three levels of government very well. Think about this for a moment: Who is going to improve the public image of engineering and defend and support the values of professional engineers in society but us?

Once again, I repeat the same message from my last article: We need to get together and establish a province-wide union that works on improving the image of engineering, increasing public awareness, as well as getting engineers involved in public-policy decision-making.

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Willowdale-Thornhill PEO chapter chair Noubar Takessian (left) and vice-chair Changiz Sadr (right) with former Ontario premier Bob Rae (centre) at the PEO annual general meeting, held in Toronto on April 28-29, 2007.



At the Engineering for Ontario Day, MPP reception on April 16, 2007, at The Sutton Place Hotel in Toronto (from left to right): Willowdale-Thornhill PEO government-liasion chair Nanda Lwin, Kim Cohen of Brown-Cohen, MPP Tim Peterson (Mississauga South, independent), PEO's Santosh Gupta, Wendy Kauffman of Brown-Cohen, and MPP David Zimmer (Willowdale, Liberal).



## The Chronicle

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## ENGINEERING NOTES by Nanda Lwin

### A Call to Action

The other two articles in this issue of *The Chronicle*, written by Noubar Takessian and Changiz Sadr, are calls to action. Takessian and Sadr speak of the recent annual general meeting of the Professional Engineers Ontario, where public policy was the predominant theme. No doubt those who read recent literature put out by the PEO and Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, are inundated by one simple message: We must be at the forefront not only on technical issues but on issues at the interface of technology and public policy.

There's no point arguing that engineers are an underrepresented group in Ottawa and at Queen's Park; not many engineers take up the grueling task of elected office. In a profession that calls for superior communication skills, debating smarts, and the occasional backroom deal, politics repel engineers. We leave it up to lawyers, businesspeople, and just about every other profession to run the province and country. And instead we bide our time complaining that we're never given our fair share of the pie.

And that's, of course, somewhat understandable. Our collective personality, as a profession, probably isn't as compatible with a political career as the said career paths. Let's face it: engineering school is a haven for many who can't bear taking another mundane course in English or the humanities. At the risk of stereotyping, I think it's safe to say that engineers, as a group, are a number-crunching bunch that loves to quantify and calculate everything and to keep to ourselves in a cubicle. Defending the government's position on our role in Afghanistan or commenting on a Private Member's bill just doesn't cut it. Making a simple 10-minute speech to concerned or even angry constituents who have grievances just isn't our cup of tea. It just goes against everything that's holy in our chosen profession.

However, it's time for us to come out of our collective shell. Whether it's putting limits on Internet technology or cutting greenhouse gas emissions or repairing Canada's aging infrastructure, Queen's Park and Parliament Hill are badly in need of the ingenuity and help that only professional engineers can offer. The time is right, particularly now, for engineers to get involved with society at large. For instance, sustainability issues have risen to the top of public opinion polls in the hierarchy of political priorities. The environment provides an array of delicate, yet complex, issues that requires technical know-how and competence. And yet, (I suspect) engineers are merely playing a role behind the scenes as technical experts, but never as major players in the debates in the House of Commons. How wonderful if engineers could spice up Question Period with their insightful observations!

It's time for engineers to engage in a dialogue about where this province and country are headed. We owe it to our families and our community. We owe it to the betterment of society.

**Nanda Lwin, P.Eng.**, is a professor of civil engineering technology at Seneca College. He is also a journalist and the author of several books.