

Looking Back at IEM

By: Y. Bhg. Datuk Engr. (Dr) Haji Ahmad Zaidee bin Laidin

Interview by: Gary Wong

Note: This interview with Y. Bhg. Datuk Engr. (Dr) Ahmad Zaidee bin Laidin is an ongoing series of interviews and collection of personal anecdotes from the Past Presidents of IEM as well as senior members of IEM. This is to provide detailed insights on the formation and evolution of IEM as a professional institution, as well as give readers a unique and privileged look at IEM behind the scenes.

INTRODUCTION

Y. Bhg. Datuk Engr. (Dr) Haji Ahmad Zaidee bin Laidin (or more affably known as Datuk Zaidee) is a well-traveled and experienced statesman with a wealth of knowledge in all things, ranging from management to all fields of engineering. He started his career in our country as an LLN engineer back in 1967, which tracks an illustrious and eventful career path, and his deep involvement with IEM accords him the unique perspective on the formation of IEM throughout the years, as well as insightful comments on IEM in general. Best known as the serving President of IEM during the turn of the century (1999 – 2001 session), Datuk Zaidee has had a remarkable engineering career culminating in the directorship of key industry companies, such as SIRIM, EON and MMC.

Colourful in character, yet humble in nature, Datuk Zaidee shares his many views and thoughts with our readers in this special interview.

IEM: HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

"What I'd like to touch upon, are maybe on things that readers may not know about", said Datuk Zaidee. "The first IEM office was in Petaling Jaya by the edge of the pond. It was no more than a wooden shed. It was initially used as a marshalling yard for PJ engineers and LLN engineers. Before being used as an IEM office, it was previously owned by LLN. It was donated by the Second IEM President, Allahyarham Raja Tan Sri Ir. Zainal bin Raja Sulaiman (who presided IEM in the 1962-1964 session), who was also the General Manager of LLN at that time."

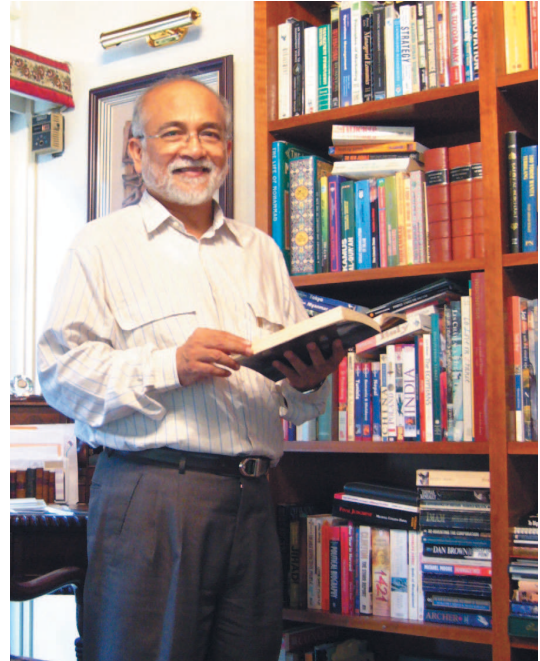
IEM AND CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP

Reminiscing on the pioneering presidents led to other issues of IEM; that of

corporate membership. The first few IEM seniors were also respected seniors and chiefs of various government corporations. For instance, the first IEM President, Allahyarham Tan Sri Ir. (Dr) Haji Yusoff bin Haji Ibrahim (President of 1959 – 1962 IEM Session) was also JKR chief. Various other heads and CEO's of organisations also held senior council positions in IEM at that time.

"Of course, it was not a rule that you have to be a head of an organisation to lead IEM," elaborated Datuk Zaidee, "but what was interesting in those days, was that top level personnel with corporate experience had a more active role in society as engineers. It is sad to say the tradition of having CEO's waned, which was the natural evolution of having a more democratic institution"

"I think it detracts a little bit of the ability of presidents who holds these top offices to be able to contribute in a more meaningful and executive manner," added Datuk Zaidee. "Secondly, it also detracts in the way that the profession itself is being managed. For instance, if our senior IEM executive council members hailed from government or government-related agencies; which are the corporations which employs the most number of engineers, for instance Telekom, TNB and JKR; chances are that senior engineers from these corporations would also be a part of IEM. I myself was drawn into IEM by my boss, the late Tengku Daud, who was Vice President at that time, and he pulled me into the committee for social and organisational status. I was a young and green engineer at that time and in those



days, we didn't have a graduate and student chapter."

"Subsequently, as IEM became more and more organised, and as the leadership became void of people in top positions, the emphasis of corporate membership dwindled. Previously, under the British, in order to hold the post of senior engineer, you have to be a corporate member, either in IEE, IMechE or ICE in the UK and consequently, many people went for corporate memberships just to attain senior engineer status. This was not incorporated in government views, due to many factors such as shortage of engineers at one time, and people were promoted to the position of senior engineer without acquiring corporate membership. The rate of increase of corporate members did not really match the number of increasing engineers in the country, and it subsequently becomes purely voluntary ("nice-to-have" instead of "must-have")."

INTERVIEW

"The idea of reminiscing on our past is also to look upon the future and to revisit previous values which are worthwhile for the new generation to adopt. I believe that corporate membership works both ways; that top level management in government agencies should attain corporate membership. Even those in the teaching profession, engineering professors and the like, should be of MIEM/FIEM status, because at the moment, it is not compulsory for engineering deans to even have professional qualifications and yet, they are the ones teaching students to become engineers. These ideas would hopefully enhance the idea of people who would want to attain Professional Engineer status in the corporate world."

ITEM AND THE 70'S – EARLY HARDSHIPS

"Other things that I think readers would like to know are situations which are not that widely known. In the early 70's, we had a problem of unemployment in the engineering sector. During that time, the economies of the region, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore were independent of one another. We may be having a slump, but Thailand and Singapore was having a boom. At that point in time, there were more than 100 unemployed engineers, which, in those days, were a large amount. Graduates from overseas as well as local universities returned without a job in hand and the situation was in dire straits".

"Allahyarham Dato' Ir. Mustafa bin Ahmad, who was Deputy President at that time, was asked by the council to go to Thailand in order to negotiate with the Thai authorities for Malaysian engineers to work in Thailand. Foreign direct investment was rushing into Thailand and Thailand had a very investment-friendly tax policy that states "If we cannot catch you for taxes for this particular year, you do not have to pay taxes for that year". It was a very attractive package and many foreign investment poured in, thereby increasing the need for engineers, the one profession that Thailand was having a shortage at that time. This was during the era of the Cold War and Thailand was one of the safer locations at that time. Unfortunately, our negotiations with the Institution of Engineers, Thailand did not bear fruit because what the Thais did, to overcome the shortage of engineers, was to

retrain their Physics and Chemistry graduates, added two more years to their internship and made them into engineers. We have to note with regret that the so-called ASEAN spirit was not as accommodating as we would have wished it to be. In other words, it was a classic case of 'your own stomach first' mentality."

THE ORIGIN OF BEM

"Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dato' Ir. Abu Zarim bin Haji Omar (President of 1970 – 1972 Session) was President when the idea of the Board of Engineers, Malaysia (BEM) was supposed to be formed. Contrary to belief, it was not an open and shut case because there were political issues involved and it was the first time that IEM 'gave up' its professional body to be apart of the government body. For Tan Sri Dato' Ir. Abu Zarim, it was not an easy decision, for it was he who proposed the idea of Ir. (now officially Engr.), which was initially meant for engineers in IEM, but as the bylaws were drafted, the rights of Ir. went to BEM as well."

"My own take on the formation of the Board of Engineers was that the government seeks to recognise a few foreign degrees within the constituency. IEM was adamant that the recognition procedure within IEM was followed and our government wanted to receive aid as well as engineering assistance from Russian joint projects. According to the IEM's rule, these engineers could not be practicing and hence, the BEM came into formation. Admittedly, IEM was a little slow in recognising degrees and training from other parts of the world and since the bulk of engineers with the government who were Western or Commonwealth trained, though there was a later situation in the Eastern Bloc and other places, I think that the government forming BEM was a natural and harmonious cooperation of government and professional institution."

CONCLUSION

We hope that readers glean a certain amount of reminiscence and nostalgia on IEM's rich history. Datuk Zaidee and many of the past presidents have forged an institutional bond, either through corporate relationships or through professional cooperation, and this accords them unique leadership insights on IEM as an institution and as a pillar of engineering. ■

A BRIEF PROFILE OF DATUK ZAIDEE

Y. Bhg. Datuk Engr. (Dr) Haji Ahmad Zaidee Laidin holds a Professional Diploma in Electrical Engineering from Brighton College of Technology, UK and a Masters of Science (Management and Industrial Science) degree in Technological Economics from the University of Stirling, Scotland. He was also awarded the Degree of Doctorate from the University by the University of Stirling and was conferred an Honorary Doctor of Technology by Oxford Brookes University, Honorary Doctor of Letters by the Manchester Metropolitan University and an Honorary Professor by Napier University, UK. In our local universities, Datuk Zaidee was the last Director of ITM (1994-1996), the first Rector of ITM (1996-1999) and the first Vice-Chancellor of University Technology of MARA (UiTM) from 1999 to 2000.

Datuk Zaidee is a Fellow of The Institution of Engineers, Malaysia (serving as Past President of IEM for the 1999 – 2001 session) as well as the Academy of Sciences, Malaysia (currently serving as Honorary Treasurer). He was also a Past President of the Federation of Engineering Institutions of SouthEast Asia and Pacific (FEISEAP) and an Honorary Fellow of the ASEAN Federation of Engineering Organisations (AFEO). Datuk Zaidee also served in the council of the World Federation of Engineering Organisations (WFEO).

Datuk Zaidee began his career in Lembaga Letrik Negara (LLN) or the National Electricity Board, in 1966 as a Distribution Engineer after serving his apprenticeship at the General Electric Company and the North-Western Electricity Board, UK. From 1973 to 1978, he served as an in-house Consultant, before being appointed Deputy Director and subsequently, Director of the NEB Training Centre. The following year, he was appointed Corporate Organisational and Manpower Planner, and in 1998, Director of Management Services and Development. From 1990 to 1993, he served as Deputy General Manager Corporate Services (Management Development Services).

Datuk Zaidee is currently an Independent Director of Malaysia Mining Corporation Berhad and Chairman of Meteor Learning Sdn. Bhd. Datuk Zaidee was the Chairman of SIRIM Berhad until 23 February 2004 and a Director of SIRIM Berhad until 14 December 2004. Datuk Zaidee also serves on the Board of Directors of Edaran Otomobil Nasional Berhad (EON) and Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN).