Calling It A Day

THE outgoing President of The Institution of Engineers, Malaysia (IEM), Y. Bhg. Dato' Paduka Engr. Hj. Keizrul bin Abdullah, will end his second term this month. During his tenure, he has implemented many changes that have thrust IEM into the limelight and, at the same time, increase the number of IEM members.

Although Datuk Paduka Engr. Hj Keizrul would like more time to put forward other ideas, he is satisfied with the changes that he has brought about. Jurutera speaks to him on what it takes to be a leader and how he can continue to contribute to the institution.

What are some of IEM's greatest achievements in the past 50 years?

Fifty years ago, a group of local engineers decided that we should form a local institution for the engineers. Although primarily modelled after the Engineering Institution of UK, they decided that the local institution should represent all branches of engineering unlike the one in UK. When the IEM was formed, its small group of members consisted of engineers from big engineering organisations.

We have now become the largest professional institution in the country. I believe one of the biggest achievements was in the formation of IEM and in getting it accepted as a benchmark for the engineering profession. This came about in 1967, when local engineers decided to set up a system whereby a regulatory body would look after the profession.

As the same time, steps were taken to enact the Registration of Engineers Act. The act itself was first placed before Parliament in 1967 and came into operation in 1972. It allowed for seven members, out of a total of 14 members including the President, of the Board of Engineers Malaysia (BEM) to be from IEM, although this was subsequently reduced to five.

Among others, the government recognised that IEM had a structure which governed the engineering practise. It had a system whereby a graduate engineer could move up to become a corporate member through a professional interview process. When the BEM was formed, the law itself recognised that if a person becomes a corporate member of IEM, he or she is then entitled to become a professional engineer.

IEM has also put in place a system of recognition whereby it recognises certain degrees as being acceptable for practise in Malaysia. We have now what is known as the Engineering Accreditation Council (EAC), and this council consists of four partners, namely, the BEM, the IEM, the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) and the Public Service Department.

IEM has also been invited to join many organisations. For example, we are a member of the Building Industry Presidential Council (BIPC), where the presidents of the various building industry related organisation are members. We also work very closely with the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB). We have become a standard writing organisation as IEM has been accreditated by the Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM).

In order for the engineers to be able to give their input on public policy, IEM has come up with numerous position papers which list our position on certain issues related to engineering, such as earthquakes, landslides, hill-slope development and flood.

When it comes to disasters such as the one that happened in Bukit Antarabangsa, the media turns to IEM to provide an authoritative voice from the engineering perspective. As an organisation which has members across the board, IEM is able to respond effectively to problems relating to different aspects of engineering.

We have gone one step further by sending these position papers to the relevant ministries. In fact, sometime last year, the Ministry Of Housing And Local Government (MHLG) invited IEM to make a presentation. During the annual budget dialogue, IEM has always been invited to share its views on issues affecting the engineering fraternity.

At the international level, we have been linked to numerous international organisations. Our close association with the Institution of Engineers Singapore (IES) led to the formation of the ASEAN Federation of Engineering Organisations (AFEO). IEM is one of the five founding members of AFEO, which includes Persatuan Insinyur Indonesia (PII), the Philippine Technological Council (PTC), the IES and the Engineering Institution of Thailand (EIT).

Over the years, AFEO has expanded to include all 10 ASEAN countries with their respective engineering organisations. IEM was appointed the permanent secretariat of AFEO and the head commissioner of the ASEAN Engineers Register (AER), which was formed as a step towards the liberalisation of professional engineering services within ASEAN, has always been an IEM member. On the national and ASEAN level, IEM can list these two positions among its many achievements.

On the global level, IEM is a member of the World Federation of Engineering Organisation (WFEO) and the Commonwealth Engineers Council (CEC). In the past, two IEM members had been elected as the chairman of CEC and one of IEM's past presidents was elected as the president of WFEO. This goes to show that we are truly recognised by our peers at the regional and international level.

As the outgoing President, what did you manage to achieve during your tenure?

Two years is a short time to be able to implement new ideas and see it come to fruition. A president can only lay down certain pathways and hope that it will be carried on, or try to make a quick impact in certain areas that he chooses. Even so, this process requires contribution from the members and staff.

When I became president in April 2007, we had a membership of 16,000. One of the things I highlighted constantly was the need for IEM to increase its membership. If we do not represent the majority of the engineers, then it is difficult to claim that we are their representatives.

It would be unfair for me to claim any credit as it was the effort of various committees that has convinced many young engineers to join as members. We now have 25,000 members. Although this has made IEM the largest professional institution in the country, we still have a long way to go.

In my first presidential address, I talked about reengineering an engineering institution. My second presidential address embraced this idea further. I talked about the need for us to reengineer to change, and if we do not do so, we would become irrelevant.

I borrow a phrase that one of my former staff at the Department of Irrigation and Drainage of Malaysia (DID) coined, 'Innovate or Evaporate.' This means that we need to change from being backbenchers to become front liners. With that, I wrote to all the Chief Ministers and Menteri Besar and propose the appointment of IEM members into the local council. I am happy to say that we have had very good response from a number of state governments.

In Perak, the state government appointed five IEM members to sit on the local council and several IEM members to sit in at the state level committee. In Negeri Sembilan, two of our members were invited to sit at the state level committee. In Sabah, the Chief Minister has given his assurance that he would consider appointing IEM members the next time they reappoint councillors.

We were also given a similar assurance in Pulau Pinang. In addition, the state government there had appointed our branch chairman to lead a group to look into hill-slope development in the state. In Selangor, we have three members sitting in several state level committees.

In the past, engineers were very hesitant to meet with the media as they usually seek their views only when a disaster strikes. However, the engineers must not be defensive and avoid them. In times of crisis, it becomes even more urgent for engineers to provide the media with information so that the public can better understand the situation and appreciate the work of engineers. I believe this situation has improved and we now have a more public face.

As for some of the other things I laid out in my presidential address, they would require time to be acted on. For example, I had posed the issue of our young engineers not being able to vote for their president. The council has taken note of the issue and has passed it on to a committee who is looking at changing our bylaws.

We are also enhancing the role of women engineers. They are going to be our biggest stakeholder in the future. In fact, we are working hard to promote the role of women in engineering through the media. We have a long list of plans lined up and we are preparing our members to address issues the public is interested in.

At the end of the day, we have to understand that IEM is run by its members for its members. However, we have grown to become such a large organisation that we sometimes forget that we are actually here to serve the members. If we are not careful, we will be like certain politicians who, instead of serving the public, have become political masters and are now experiencing a backlash.

When I was a young engineer, I had attended an AGM where somebody wanted to raise an issue. However, the president of the day objected as the person did not give prior notice. I was frustrated as I believe that no organisation should be like that. I hope we can overcome such problems much earlier and avoid the problem of members forming splinter groups.

How can past leaders continue to contribute to IEM?

After I finish my term as president, I will remain in the council as the immediate past president. Within the council itself, five past presidents are selected to serve in the council. Past presidents are also tapped for their experience.

Although we want our past presidents to be active, the structure is such that, because we are run by committees which are headed by the vice president, it can be a bit awkward if the past president sits on the committee. Maybe they can help out in those areas they were pushing for to carry through. For sure, we have not tapped enough into the experience of our past presidents.

In what areas do you feel that IEM can further improve on?

One of the areas we can improve on is the use of information technology. We should enable our members to make changes to their profiles online and make the institution more user-friendly. One of the biggest complaints from our branch members is the lack of activities that will allow them to accumulate CPD hours.

To address this issue, we should look into the concept of video conferencing. For example, if there is a technical talk in Kuala Lumpur, it should be webcasted so that members all over the country can watch it. Another alternative is to record the talk and make it available for the members. We should provide the same level of service to our members irrespective of where they are.

Another area is to encourage IEM members to be more visible and active within civil society. For example, to deal with the coming recession, we are organising a forum on public transportation and how engineers can contribute in this area. At the same time, we are also working with the Eastern Regional Organisation for Planning and Housing (EAROPH) to organise another public forum.

What do you hope to see IEM achieve in the next 50 years?

Although society has changed, we must never forget that the young are the leaders of tomorrow. It is important for IEM and the government not to lose touch with the younger generation. It has taken us 50 years to be where we are today, so in the next 50 years, we must achieve more than that. We have managed to increase the membership from 16,000 to 25,000 in just two years. So nothing is impossible.

If we want Malaysia to be a developed country, we must have more scientists and engineers. Although some people think there are too many engineers, it is still not enough with most estimates saying we need at least 200,000 engineers. This is nothing compared to the 100,000 engineers Singapore has despite its small population.

Although this figure would put us at par with some of our neighbours, most people forget that it is only to meet today's conditions. When we become a developed country, 200,000 engineers may not be enough because the population would have increased.

If we want to be a developed country, we cannot be comparing ourselves to today's benchmark. We have to push harder and progress at a faster rate. In the next 50 years, I would like to see IEM set such a high standard that we become the benchmark for institutions all around the world. This is not impossible as we have become the benchmark in many areas.

Let us become the leading nation in terms of the engineers, the engineering practise and the engineering profession. To achieve this, we have to be looking at the generation who is in kindergarten today. At the same time, we have to start grooming the present young generation so that the younger generation have a good example to follow. ■