

Reflections on a year as President of the Institution

John Nolan 2012 President of The Institution of Structural Engineers

Where did this year go? I have almost completed my year as President, but it seems like only yesterday that I gave my Inaugural Address at HQ.

Valerie and I had a marvellous time doing the first tranche of visits to Regional Groups and have greatly enjoyed the dinner season this Autumn, where we were able to meet many more members and their guests. I must say that the universal friendliness and hospitality that we have received has been fantastic and it has been a true privilege to represent the Institution at universities; construction projects and in meetings with allied professional bodies, all made possible by our attendance at events hosted by the Regional Groups. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who went out of their way to make those visits so pleasurable. Their names are too many to list, but I would particularly like to mention Peris Dean at HQ who has brilliantly juggled my diary and travel arrangements.

My Presidential theme was 'Cost versus Value – The role of the Consulting Structural Engineer'. In brief, this was a statement of concern that amongst other things, the pressure to minimise fees was causing a severe reduction in value to the service consulting engineers could provide. Not only was that detrimental to Institution members, but as a professional body with an ethos of education and public safety, the impact of fee reduction was potentially detrimental to society as a whole. I listed a number of actions where it was possible either at Institution level or individually as President, to try to influence an improvement in the situation. It is only right that I report back to you on subsequent developments and I do so based on the headings in my Presidential Address (*The Structural Engineer*, February 2012).

From the outset, I did recognise that for many of the Institution's global members, some of these issues are essentially UK focused. I am however of the firm opinion that many of these topics have parallels around the world. It is my hope that the experiences shared here, may assist progress and resolution wherever Institution members are based.

Delivering my Inaugural Address at Institution HQ in London



The Public Sector

I had intended to "forward my Address to Paul Morrell, the UK Government's Construction Advisor and challenge him to provide national guidance to state sector clients on the simplification of European Union (OJEU) documentation with particular emphasis on the value of a track record in cost effective design when assessing design professionals". Events somewhat overtook me when, soon after, Paul Morrell announced that he would be standing down. His successor, Peter Hansford, is a former President of the Institution of Civil Engineers and is well known to us. He takes up his position this month and I look forward to meeting up with him.

Fortuitously, the European Parliamentary Member Malcolm Harbour, who Chairs the Committee for Public Sector Procurement read my address and met with me keen to hear my views, since a review of the OJEU procedures was underway. He was receptive to comments I put forward and as a result, the bulk of my comments appear to have been taken on board and incorporated into the latest draft. It is anticipated that the new OJEU rules will be published some time next year and will be less bureaucratic, with much greater emphasis on the value for money of the final product. Malcolm did also say that a lot of the problems with OJEU were down to national interpretation and that other countries did not interpret the rules in the

same way as we do.

In parallel, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) published a report entitled *Building Ladders of Opportunity - How reforming construction procurement can drive growth in the UK economy* which I commend to you. It is very closely aligned with the views in my Address. RIBA President Angela Brady invited support for this publication from our Institution (which we were delighted to give) and asked me to speak in support at its launch, which I duly did. Subsequently I have been invited to join their Procurement Reform Panel which has the ear of the Government Cabinet Office. I am very keen to continue this representation on behalf of the Institution beyond my tenure as President.

During the course of the year the Parliamentary All Party Group for Excellence in the Built Environment has also been considering public sector procurement and in September published a report entitled *A Better Deal for Public Building*. I attended its launch. In my opinion this is one of the best, if not the best, reports the UK Government has produced. It delivers a 13 point plan to increase value for money for the taxpayer. It says that "public sector clients are often poorly equipped to commission construction work and often fail to devote enough time and effort to developing the brief and managing the project". Key recommendations include:

- Setting up a Best Practice Procurement Advisory Group; procuring projects on the basis of integrated teams the selection of which should not be based on lowest price
- Ensuring large scale public sector projects have mandatory construction commitments based on the 2012 Construction Commitments; Government should promote these commitments across the industry and celebrate success
- The Chief Construction Advisor should prepare an annual report on the performance of public sector clients

I am heartened that if Government takes up these recommendations and the draft OJEU becomes law this should generate a sea change in public sector procurement to the benefit of society and our profession. With any luck this will also have a beneficial knock-on effect in the private sector.

This topic was close to my heart when preparing for my year as President and I am delighted to be able to report on some significant progress during the year.

The Private Sector

I stated in my Address that "as part of our 2012 business plan it is intended to prepare a guide specifically aimed at the domestic clients and what they should expect when engaging a Chartered Structural Engineer". This is still work in progress.

Education of our Young Engineers

I continue to be a member of the Education Task Group which has already gone live with its first e-learning modules. Additionally, it has prepared a university syllabus recommendation and draft guidance notes for teaching approximate design. I have high hopes for the output from this Task Group and that it will successfully redefine structural engineering education for the computer age.

In tandem and whilst I can't take any credit, I am delighted with the content of the excellent Technical Guidance Notes published in *The Structural Engineer* since the start of the year. They are a considerable added benefit for student and graduate engineers and a useful aide memoir for the more experienced.

At this year's Past President's Luncheon, my concerns regarding the paucity of engineers with practical experience teaching in our universities, and the career path bias towards materials researchers leading to a shortage of appropriately qualified and experienced structures lecturers, provided the basis for a lively discussion topic. A large number of the Past Presidents are current or former members of the Joint Board of Moderators (JBM) that accredits



On site at Burntisland Fabricators in Fife, Scotland – part of my visit to the Aberdeen and Offshore Regional Group



Raising the profile of structural engineering and architectural practices responsible for London 2012 Olympic projects



RIBA's Angela Brady and I at London's Olympic Park – part of our subsequent work with LOCOG

degrees at UK universities. Not surprisingly their knowledge and input was enormously valuable. This topic was further discussed and debated at the Institution's 4th Annual Academics Conference and the work of our Education Project Steering Committee will be instrumental in helping address this topic. No doubt it will feature prominently when I attend a JBM meeting this month. The Royal Academy of Engineering are acutely aware of the problem and are providing funding for Universities to appoint "RAE Visiting Professors" who should be senior practicing members of the profession. I have been invited by The University of Birmingham to fulfil that role with them and I would strongly encourage others to support this initiative.

PI Insurance

Martin and I had a meeting with senior representatives of the PI insurance industry to discuss my concerns that practices that carried out work at cut price fees were more likely to be generating claims – and that their premiums were effectively being subsidised by those who were charging the



Lord Digby Jones, Martin Powell and myself at the 2012 Maitland Lecture

appropriate fee for carrying out a proper job. Their response was rather surprising. They stated that in fact the majority of claims were associated with the larger more complicated projects, which by their nature were usually carried out by the larger consultants and that their premiums took this into account. The claims record of the small and medium sized practices was much better in comparison and as such was markedly different to other professions such as Law where the bulk of claims emanated from the smaller practices. I surmised that this might be due to the SMEs by their nature having a bias towards more experienced staff working on their projects. The insurers also stated that the PI insurance market was unusually soft at the moment so there was little upwards pressure on premiums, but warned that our members should be very wary of the small print when purchasing cover online.

Consultancy

The appropriateness of the fees you are quoting is a very delicate area for Institution comment. However I do commend that, when appropriate, you take every opportunity to introduce yourself with your Institution qualification. What better way can there be to differentiate your standards and offering?

"In my opinion, the most important role of the President is that of Board Chairman"

The Institution Chairing the Board

In my opinion, the most important role of the President is that of Board Chairman; leading the Institution's Board and supporting the Chief Executive and his team in the development and delivery of our plans. I have thoroughly enjoyed this aspect of my year and commend the energy and care of all involved in their stewardship and vision for this great Institution.

Current initiatives

Amongst several initiatives being pursued, we are awaiting the outcome of the UK Government's deliberations on Registration in England and remain hopeful. Additionally, a review of our examinations structure is underway and I very much support the Membership Committee's proposal to bring in an online structural behaviour course and exam route to Associate Membership for BSc and BEng graduates. Having seen some of the draft content, I would be keen to see all graduates required to pass this exam. The Examinations Panel are aware of my views on design cost effectiveness and will be taking them into consideration as the exam evolves.

Strategy

In addition to reviewing activity against my personal theme for the year I think that it is also reasonable to ask how the Institution has performed during my Presidency and Chairmanship, on the five strategic strands intended to enable our core vision, which is "To lead, support and nurture the development of structural engineering worldwide." I will deal with those as follows (concentrating specifically on areas in which I have been pleased to play a part):

An Institution that raises the profile of structural engineering

Having spent quite a lot of time with RIBA, Angela Brady and I both saw the London Olympics as an excellent joint PR opportunity. However it was brought to our attention that LOCOG, the Olympics procurement organisation, had banned the practices responsible for designing the Olympic facilities from advertising their involvement, apparently to protect the brands of the multinational sponsors! We felt that this was unreasonable and considered that it was important that our unsung heroes and also our professions should be recognised. To cut a long story short, we had the names of the architectural and structural engineering practices that we were aware of, printed on a large banner and set up a PR opportunity, unfurling this down the front of the RIBA HQ. This was quite widely reported in the press. As you might imagine it got the attention of LOCOG! Realising the depth of feeling and potential bad press they subsequently reviewed their rules and relaxed their interpretation of them. Following this success we gave consideration to what else we could jointly do and decided to produce a heritage film, interviewing the architects and structural engineers responsible for the structures in the Olympic Park, in front of their structures. This was done on the last three days of the Paralympics with the help and support of LOCOG who have also promised to make their construction archive footage available to us. At time of writing the initial editing has commenced. It is intended that an hour long film will be produced for television viewing together with shorter clips that can be launched on social media. This will also provide an added opportunity to generate inspirational career films for schools and universities from the material.

An Institution that maintains high standards

I have previously mentioned the work of the Education Task Group which I believe strongly reinforces this thread. I should also note that our Academics Conference goes from strength to strength and this year I had the pleasure of presenting our inaugural Excellence in Structural Engineering Education Award to the University of Salford for their paper *The Structures Thread at the University of Salford*. The University of Bath were also commended for their paper *Innovative Structural Engineering Teaching at the University of Bath*. Earlier this year I gave a talk on academic standards to the ACED (UK Academic Civil Engineering Departments) Conference.

An Institution that improves the support provided for members

The work related to the Olympics and that associated with public sector construction procurement falls into this category. Additionally Martin and I visited the UAE to initiate the process of setting up the legal entity for the local regional group and met with Government officials to strengthen their understanding of what we do. I had a similar meeting with the Ontario Society of Engineers in Canada.

An Institution committed to increasing numbers in membership

It was a great honour during my trips to the UAE and Canada to help reinforce (and I believe strengthen) relationships with affiliate engineering bodies. In particular I want to make reference to our visit to the SEI Conference in Chicago where we met with their President and CEO and discussed areas of common interest and how we can help each other build on reciprocal agreements signed and in place over many years. These discussions were most encouraging and all parties agreed that they should be ongoing. Indeed, subsequent to our visit, Martin made a return trip to the US for further talks. One of their senior members Glenn Bell spoke at last month's Council meeting and attended our Structural Awards dinner as a guest of the Institution.

At the time of writing "cohort student membership application forms" have been distributed to all of our Student Liaison Officers as part of our on-going recruitment drive to pick up the new intake of university Freshers.



On site at Plymouth University's New Marine Building with Prof. Deborah Greaves

"I am passionate about the progress we are making with our educational initiatives"



An Institution that secures its future through appropriate commercial activity

Martin and I are continuing to liaise with our landlords, Grosvenor Estates, with regard to the future of our remaining lease at Upper Belgrave Street. We are hopeful that we may be able to sell the remainder of the lease before it starts to depreciate as we approach the end of its term. We intend to use the proceeds to purchase new premises, more appropriate to our future needs. We will report further when our negotiations are concluded and we have a firm proposal to put to the Board.

Continuing involvement

As the Institution continues to evolve, particularly with its international ambitions, it is clear that activities do not always conveniently conclude at the end of a President's year in office and a strong element of continuity is required. I am pleased therefore, that with the support of the Board, next year's President YK Cheng and the Chief Executive, I will be able to see the filming and the premises relocation to their conclusion. Additionally I will carry on my association with our initiatives in the UAE and USA. I am passionate about the progress we are making with our educational initiatives and my involvement with the Education Task Group will also continue, as will my involvement with RIBA.

Thank you once again to those members and staff who have made this year such a wonderful experience and provided such friendly help and hospitality. Whatever I have managed to achieve, it couldn't have been done without you!



Presenting Eva MacNamara (winner of the 2012 Young Structural Engineer Award) with her certificate at the Institution's annual Awards Luncheon