

The professions and New Zealand forestry

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Introduction

The Journal's issue on Professional Expectations was both timely and thought-provoking. When viewed from my perspective – that of an immigrant Canadian engineer – it raises some pertinent issues. I feel moved to comment.

I'll outline the circumstances for the profession of engineering in Canada, which are different from those for engineers in New Zealand and very different for those in forestry in New Zealand, then I'll reflect on issues of New Zealand forestry.

Professional engineering in Canada

The Canadian provincial and territorial governments have granted charters creating self-governing professions within each jurisdiction. The professional bodies have teeth, as indeed they must, to maintain their status independent of government. To practise engineering in Canada, one must be a registered professional engineer. There are two pathways toward registration:

1. successful completion of an undergraduate degree in engineering, accredited by the Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board (CEAB), successful completion of examinations in Engineering Profession and Ethics, and two to four years' (depending on jurisdiction) engineering practice under the mentorship of a registered professional engineer; or,
2. successful completion of a series of technical examinations, plus the Profession and Ethics examinations, plus two to four years' engineering practice.

In the past, I have been the author and examiner for some of the Forest Engineering technical papers. I am now a mentor for a Canadian engineer-in-training working in Auckland, and can attest that the process is rigorous: We must meet quarterly to discuss her work, and she submits input to a monthly report I must make to APEGNB in her home province regarding her professional and technical progress.

If a practising engineer is convicted of, say, incompetence, the penalties can be severe, including the suspension of their license for a period of time, or perhaps for good. Given that a license is needed to practise, one's livelihood is obviously severely curtailed should that happen.

As an engineer registered in Ontario, I receive the Professional Engineers of Ontario (PEO) *Dimensions* periodical, and find the proceedings of the Disciplinary Committee sober reading, interesting case-history study, and at the same

time, an acute reminder of one's obligations.

In Canadian professional engineering, *one's obligation to the public comes first*. The public long ago entrusted the enforcement of high moral conduct to the profession: in return, certain obligations are due. The existence of these obligations is highlighted at the start of one's career by the Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer.

The Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer: the Iron Ring ceremony

Most Canadian engineers, upon graduation, participate in the Iron Ring ceremony. It must be understood that the ceremony is completely independent of the regulation of the profession, left to provincial regulatory bodies. It is also has nothing to do with the learned societies (CSCE, CSME, etc.) under the Engineering Institute of Canada (EIC).

The ceremony has its origins in a meeting of past presidents of EIC in 1922. At the meeting, a Professor Haultain expressed a need for an organisation to bind members of the profession in Canada more closely together. He felt a strong need for a statement of ethics to which young engineers could subscribe, a Hippocratic Oath for engineers.

Haultain's contemporary, Rudyard Kipling, was approached and soon Kipling submitted the Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer. Central to the ceremony is the "simple end of directing the newly qualified engineer toward a consciousness of the profession and its social significance, and indicating to the more experienced engineer their responsibilities in welcoming and supporting newer engineers when they are ready to enter the profession" (Iron Ring, 2004). During the ceremony, new engineers are "ringed" by established engineers, receiving a simple stainless steel (not actually iron anymore) ring, to be worn on the little finger of the working hand, a constant, quiet reminder of one's obligations. The ceremony is performed in camera, and is quite a moving occasion. It is unique to engineering in Canada.

There is a story that the original rings were made from the failed members of the Quebec Bridge, a monumental construction in its day. The bridge collapsed during construction in 1907, killing approximately 90 workers. The story goes that the rings are a poignant reminder of an engineer's responsibilities to workers and the public. While it makes a good story, I understand it isn't true, more's the pity.

Professional forestry in New Zealand

So engineers in Canada are noble folk who hold the public's interest uppermost through their working day, iron rings glinting on fingers. At least that's the aspiration, and there are very serious consequences if they fail. But what does that have to do with forestry, in New Zealand?

My interest was piqued by Bruce Manley's editorial. His first sentence was "Forestry professionals must meet the expectations of their clients or employers, the broader community, and their peers". Note the order: clients and employers *first*, "broader community" second. Not good, but perhaps I was being a bit pedantic, as he went on to list the topics covered in that issue of the *Journal* as:

- Professional obligations (NZIF expectations of members, Code of Ethics)
- Professional liability
- Managing professional risk.

...more like what I'd expect of a profession, putting the Code first.

Of the feature articles, I found the *first* dealt with the Delivery of Professional Forestry Services, and was an exposé of how to deal with clients. Little about the "broader community" there. The next article was about Professional Indemnity Insurance. The third dealt with Liability for Forestry Consultants, and the fourth, the ...Standard Terms of Engagement Guidelines for Consultants.

Finally, with the fifth article, I came to NZIF Expectations of Registered Members. That sounded more like what I would have expected for the *lead* discussion. Tim Thorpe described the background of the registration scheme, noting that the NZIF has certain expectations of its members, including upholding the Code. However, I had to go on to the *sixth* article to gain some insight as to what the Code is about.

In that article, Peter Berg was careful to lay out what a Code is and how Ethics can be defined. He listed the reasons for having a code, including setting performance standards, telling the community the level of performance to expect, telling aspiring members what is expected of them, enabling a comparison with other non-members offering similar services¹, enabling an assessment of the quality of performance and providing a basis for disciplinary action². Nothing there about an obligation to the public, although there were those references to performance standards.

Section 3 of Peter's article discussed the Code

directly. The key elements were said to be Professional Responsibility, Responsibility to Clients, Fees, Work by Members in Employment, Competency, Use of Member's Name and Designation, and Advertising and Promotion. This sounds as if it's all centred mostly on professionals running competent businesses, but there might have been some illumination in that first part, Professional Responsibility.

Reading that more closely, I found that "Maintenance of the highest standards of integrity and courtesy to *clients and colleagues*, and *loyalty to the Institute [are] mandatory* – while technical and factual accuracy [are] emphasised" (italics are mine). No mention of an obligation to the public, at all, let alone first.

Discussion

I submit that if NZ foresters don't take an obligation to the public as the *primary* responsibility of the profession, the public will in turn not have much respect for the profession. I wish I had a dollar for every high school student who's asked me at careers fairs, "Why should I do the four year forestry degree at Canterbury when I can get the same thing in a year at 'poly'?" No appreciation of professionalism in that question. A lay member reading the *Journal's* feature articles could be forgiven for mistaking the profession as a closed shop intended to improve its members' business prospects. Our recently-retired senior technician Karl Schasching noted that in his day, in Europe, the Forester in the community was a person held in high esteem by the public. Do Kiwis in general feel that way now?

My point is *not* that the various issues discussed in the *Journal's* issue on the profession are unimportant – they are. But when viewed from the perspective of a different profession, they seem to miss the *salient* point. I'm not suggesting that NZIF engage some modern Kipling and begin to wear (wooden?) rings on their pinkies, but I am suggesting that unless the profession gives due consideration to its obligations to the public, expresses those obligations clearly and overtly, and then acts on them, daily, the public will be unlikely to regard the profession with the respect it should deserve.

Incidentally, I note that the *Journal* does not show the memberships of its authors (eg. Peter Berg, FNZIF). The first step toward better public recognition of the profession is for professionals to recognise each other.

¹ a thought: should that be legal?

² but what right does the profession currently have to impose any significant disciplinary action?