

# Towards one Institution of Engineers

It could be said that the UK engineering profession started to fragment and weaken when the ICE failed to admit mechanical engineer George Stephenson, who went on to found the IMechE. Energy consultant **Robert Freer** says the ICE should focus on unifying the whole profession while it is still in good shape.

The story that George Stephenson was refused admission to the newly founded Institution of Civil Engineers because, as a mechanic, he was not a 'gentleman engineer' is, like many other popular stories, probably apocryphal.

But the fact remains that the formation of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, some 30 years after the Civils, with George Stephenson as its first president, started the fragmentation of the engineering profession which has continued relentlessly and has bedevilled the efforts of engineers today to establish and maintain influence with politicians and with the general public. Today there are between 30 and 40 institutions accommodating the main engineering specialisations and many more representing minor interests.

Almost everything we do nowadays to build or to maintain the national infrastructure is sponsored or influenced in some way by the Government. It is thus in the interests of all of us that we have sufficient influence with Government to ensure policies are first guided by sound technical advice and then carried out in a technically efficient manner.

## Problems for Government

Throughout the country there are many technical specialists on every subject able to offer such advice but, with 30 or 40 institutions claiming to speak for the engineering profession, how does the Government know how to locate and make the best use of this reservoir of information?

It would be much simpler if the Government was able to speak to one Institution of

Engineers which could offer positive technical advice on matters of both policy and its implementation distilled from a wide range of opinions within its membership. Unanimity among specialists is not to be expected and is unlikely to be achieved but, if different views and their consequences are clearly stated and an appropriate technical judgement clearly made, it becomes much easier for politicians to adopt and pursue a sound and workable policy.

Personal individuality would not be lost because, within the one institution, there would be a number of special interest groups (as we have now) to provide the 'intellectual home' for specialist practitioners.

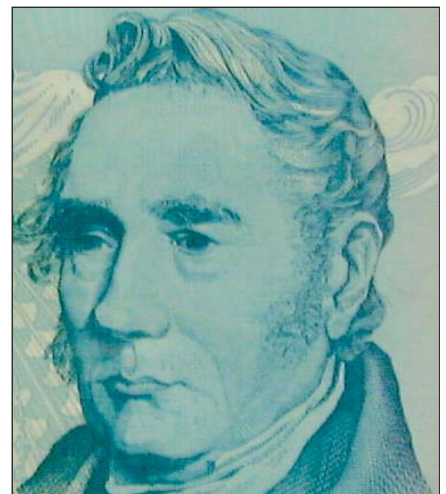
The problem has been recognised for many years and the Government's impatience with the present arrangements has also been apparent. Those of us who contributed to the discussions during the Finiston enquiry more than 20 years ago (which was prompted by the Government of the day) had hoped that it would lead to a reversal of the fragmentation and an unification of the main institutions, but this did not happen.

## Grass roots change already underway

Today we have another opportunity to bring the institutions together, and it may be the last opportunity. Almost all institutions are concerned that their membership is static or declining and in any case is ageing. The historical distinctions between the different types of engineer are fading: all the large engineering employers and commercial organisations are now multidisciplinary and engineers work closely in multi-disciplinary teams.

If the objective of unification is worthwhile, how do we achieve it? This is a process of change which could well start from the grass roots and work its way up. In the local regions, co-operation and joint meetings between the institutions are already a matter of fact, and at national level joint technical studies on special subjects are being carried out.

For instance, energy specialists from the main institutions met in 1998 and 1999 to



George Stephenson went on to found the IMechE after being refused admission to the ICE – 150 years later is it time to re-unite the profession?

prepare for presentation to the Government the *Millennium Vision 2020* report on future energy supplies. During that exercise we found that the separate energy boards were simply duplicating the work being done by the others and this convinced several of us that closer co-operation would be sensible and continuing links should be established. The response by the ICE in 2003 to the Government's Energy White Paper was written to try to achieve agreement with the other institutions.

At national level, the long-term advantages of unification can become overshadowed by immediate problems such as assets, buildings and jobs, but it is much better for the institutions to start negotiations now on a basis of equality than to allow the opportunity to slip by for a number of years when economic necessity may force some institutions to seek amalgamation as an alternative to possible extinction.

This is a situation and an opportunity where the ICE could take the lead.

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT

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