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What follows the squabble?

THE engineering profession in Britain has been in disarray for some time over its structure. There are fifteen separate institutions, each of which fulfils the double role of acting as a learned society and looking after the professional interests of its particular members. Ten years ago the Council of Engineering Institutions (CEI) was formed as the first move towards providing some sort of unified body that could represent engineers to government, in international circles, or just to each other; there was never any intention that the institutions should lose their separate identities as a result of these moves.

Unfortunately, the CEI has turned out to be just what its title says it is—an assemblage of institutions, each with its own pride, prejudice, president, executive secretary, council and awareness of the size of its membership, be it above or below the average. Thus the small institutions have been worried about being steam-rolled in the CEI, while the big ones have been worried that they can be outvoted. As a result, progress towards establishing a real voice for the engineering profession as a whole has been slow and marked by considerable bitterness which led late last year to the Institution of Electrical Engineers (one of the biggest institutions) giving a year's notice of intention to quit the CEI.

Maybe this threat has had a salutary effect at a time when the CEI's statutes are now being prepared for approval by the Privy Council. In the months of negotiation ahead compromises are on the cards all round, in the knowledge that the Privy Council is hardly likely to endorse a constitution to which at least one major institution objects (and the mechanical engineers seem to be equally unhappy).

Engineers can ill afford the time and emotional, even conspiratorial, energy that is being spent by their representatives in arguing over the CEI. If conciliatory gestures fail in the near future it is inevitable that demands for a public enquiry into the organisation of the engineering profession will grow, and with good cause. There are obvious attractions to handing the whole mess over to a small committee whose members have no

axe to grind, and gracefully accepting their solution. But if this is done, it is important that the terms of reference of the public enquiry should be right. What is really needed is not a convenient way of patching together a group of institutions by neatly balancing voting procedures and carefully avoiding putting a bunch of president's noses out of joint. The body that should be created is a Council of Engineers to which individuals would have a stronger sense of loyalty. Some argue that modelling such a council on the General Medical Council would be a good thing, producing a lean organisation with some lay membership, concerned with qualifications, discipline, education and so on. Certainly some bread-and-butter matters such as the nature of engineering qualifications and their interchangeability within the European Economic Community need attention, and such a body would devote much of its time to these affairs. But engineers should not pass up the opportunity to go further and use the council to provide an accessible profession-wide forum.

Engineers are often not people with the broadest vision, indeed sometimes their vision seems narrower even than that of scientists. In times of plenty this may not seem to matter too much—there will always be work available and few will question the benefits of technology. The problem surfaces only when times are hard, and it may be characterised as a loss of nerve. Technology is then not only an easy target for cutbacks but is accorded the blame for many of our woes. On the whole engineers do not seem to have come to terms very well with new moods in society, and one of the reasons for this is probably that there is not a great enough number of them prepared to read, think and talk together about the place of the engineer in society. This surely must be done on as wide a basis as possible, using the resources that all sectors of the profession can bring. While there is dissent about the CEI it cannot be done effectively. A public enquiry should at least be aware that some needs of the engineering community go beyond those of simply voting, acquiring a string of qualifications and doing a day's work. □