

Check Delivery

Engineering Council UK 'Sustainability Guidelines'

Speech Given At the Launch of the Above Leaflet

Thursday 21 May 2009, House of Commons

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My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Welcome to the Houses of Parliament. This is spot an MP day (this speech was given late in the afternoon when Parliament had dissolved for the Whitsuntide recess). Well, I'm here.

First, let me allay your suspicions; my expenses are in the bottom quartile of MP's expenses and, when the Manchester Evening News wrote on me in their paper today, they were critical of the number of highlighting pens that we buy. I blame the Engineering Council myself (Brian showed his audience his speech, key phrases heavily highlighted in yellow).

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to say a few words about the leaflet 'Guidance on Sustainability', which the Engineering Council is publishing today.

The IUSS Select Committee, of which I am a Member, has published a major report recently on engineering in the UK. To keep the inquiry within manageable bounds we selected three disparate aspects of engineering, which we studied in some depth - nuclear engineering, plastic electronics, and geoengineering.

One of our recommendations to Government was that, as well as the appointment of a Chief Scientific Adviser, Government should also appoint a Chief Engineering Adviser.

During our inquiry we came to appreciate the critical contribution that engineering makes both to society, and to the economy, in tackling and solving many of the world's most daunting challenges. We were convinced that the strength of the UK's engineering base will allow it to play a major part in solving global problems such as climate change, food security, water supply, energy security and economic stability. So, our report is about, in part, what the leaflet that we are launching today is all about, namely sustainability.

The third aspect of our report I wanted to mention was the support we have given to the UK's system of professional engineering qualifications and registration. We

used the term “chartering” but, of course, we realise that registration with ECUK covers Engineering Technicians and Incorporated Engineers, as well as Chartered Engineers.

The existence of a set of professional titles, linked to a set of clearly stated standards of professional competence and commitment – UK-SPEC, as it is known - and developed by ECUK with all the professional engineering institutions - in our view constitutes one of the great strengths of engineering in this country.

Our great regret was that it appeared to be better known and respected internationally than in this country.

In our report we urged ECUK and the professional engineering institutions to do more to promote the professional status evidenced by these titles and the UK-SPEC standard.

These last two aspects of our report, the one general and all-embracing, the other specific, are happily brought together in the document which is being published today.

Our report described engineering as addressing climate change, food security and water supply, energy security, and economic and social stability, which are at the core of sustainable development. Their interdependence is indeed the very essence of sustainability.

Few doubt now that sustainability is crucial if everyone on this planet is to have the chance to have their basic needs met and to live securely, and I do mean everyone, the people of the developing world as well as the developed one. I think that all of us in this place are agreed on that.

There are, of course, differences of opinion about the best ways to ensure stability and I have no doubt that there will continue to be debates within and between political parties about the most appropriate policies to follow. But, of its importance we are I think all convinced. In the short term our focus politically is on economic issues, and rightly so. Hopefully, this focus will be short term.

Those who wish to be recognised as Engineering Technicians, Incorporated Engineers or Chartered Engineers now have to demonstrate their engagement with sustainability. As Professor Bogle said, several of the professional engineering institutions, as well as the Royal Academy of Engineering, have done valuable work on sustainability for a number of years. I know that there have also been valuable exchanges between the engineering profession and organisations such as Forum for the Future. All that work is reflected in this guidance which ECUK has produced today.

Engineering has been criticised because of the large number of its different representative bodies; we counted over forty. What we found during our enquiry was that the engineering community was capable of a coherent and co-ordinated

response to us and did succeed in communicating a common message.

Similarly, in this guidance leaflet ECUK has succeeded in bringing together expert thinking from across the engineering profession and distilling it into a clear and concise set of principles, which can be seen as relevant to all areas of engineering.

The document is, of course, aimed primarily at professional engineers. It is a simple ethical code, but simplicity does not mean triviality, and the guidance certainly reflects the many different aspects of sustainability which need to be borne in mind.

It will be invaluable for engineers at whatever stage of their career they may be at. It illustrates the leadership role which engineers have in sustainable development and it is written in terms which the general public can understand.

The little card which accompanies the guidance (this is my 'John Prescott moment') will be particularly valuable in communicating how important an engineer's contribution to sustainability is.

Public understanding of what engineers do is certainly not all that it might be, as we discovered during our inquiry. Engineers themselves need to get the message over to the public out there that they are the ones who will solve the problems of climate change and energy shortages, for example.

The six principles on this card actually convey much of the essence of engineering. Communicated properly they will do much to help the public (and I include politicians in that term) to understand how important engineering is in securing our future.

I should like to close by congratulating Professor Bogle and his working group on their work, and wishing Professor Fidler and the ECUK every success in working with the engineering profession to communicate this guidance as widely as possible. I take great pleasure in commending it to you all.

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