

**Speech of the
HKIE President Ir Aaron BOK at
The HKIE 45th Annual Dinner
17 March 2023**

Acting Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region,
Distinguished Guests, Fellow Members, Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to our Annual Grand Ceremony – the HKIE Annual Dinner held for the first time since 2019. It is nice to finally be able to see the mask-free faces of friends, to shake hands and to sit next to each other to celebrate not only the end of a devastating pandemic, but the beginning of a new era of growth for Hong Kong.

As COVID succeeded a period of great uncertainty, our city seemed stuck in the wrong gear. But thanks to the leadership of our government, the lifting of all sanitary measures has also lifted the spirit of Hong Kong. From traveling overseas and visiting our motherland to hosting banquets or mingling at live events like our HK Engineers Week 2023, the people of Hong Kong are finally free and excited to proudly say that “Hong Kong is back!”.

Engineers too should be excited. As work resumes in earnest and our beloved city transitions toward a better, smarter and greener future, engineers need to prepare to meet the challenges stocktaken in my Presidential Address last October. Spanning land, housing, transportation, hospitals, innovation and technology, the strategic development plan promulgated by the government is essential and important to our community. And much of its success will depend on engineers. As I always advocate – “Engineers’ work is right at the heart of advancement of every city and even human civilisation”.

I am glad to say that government policies are making the engineering profession not only more needed, but also more appealing. As mega-projects like the Northern metropolis, the Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands, new housing (including the Light Public Housing) and many others add an extra \$340 billion in annual construction expenditure over the next decade, the prospects for engineers involved in construction are very attractive. Meanwhile, the “Hong Kong Innovation and Technology Development Blueprint” to build HK into an innovation and technology hub anchored by six key smart areas will drive the demand for engineers across disciplines like Artificial Intelligence, robotic, biomedical and other industrial areas to new heights.

Connected with Shenzhen and underpinning the Greater Bay Area’s rise as an I&T powerhouse, the Northern Metropolis will not only provide much-needed land for the advancement of innovation and technology, but also create a platform for pooling together local talents and experts from other GBA cities and overseas.

With all these developments, what could be better than this golden age for becoming an engineer?

The CIC’s report “Manpower Forecast for Hong Kong Construction Industry” released last month made one thing clear: the construction industry will face an unprecedented shortage of manpower, including about 3,000 engineers. This CIC report validates the HKIE’s position advocated in our earlier report “Augmenting Engineer Manpower to meet foreseeable surge in demand”. Published in April last year, our report forecasts a substantial shortage in engineers in the years ahead. To address this shortage, we urge the government and the industry to join hands to adopt new technology and materials; streamline administrative processes; promote a facilitating culture among government vetting authorities; broaden our engineer base; improve efficiency and productivity and – most importantly – attract new talents to the profession.

This is because while big opportunities lie ahead, we are NOT worrying of missing the boat, instead, we must NOT let down the missions vested upon us by the society.

Our biggest challenge is succession. As I have explained in my Presidential Address last October, there exists a vicious circle which results in many young engineers receiving poor working packages in the early stages of their career. Meanwhile, the media has a tendency to overlay the less than 1% defects in the industry while ignoring our 99% good work and contribution. These factors discourage many students from even considering a career in engineering.

We must work together to reverse this trend. If medical errors do not detract students from embracing the noble mission of that profession, why should industrial accidents define ours? Please don't get me wrong. We must do our utmost to prevent accidents and other industrial defects from happening. But as I trust that our special guest tonight Ir Thomas Ho from CIC will give us a strong message on this issue, I will focus my speech on the nurturing of new engineers. To succeed, we must both enhance the working environment of young engineers and rectify the misinformation received by students. This begins with building a positive image for our profession.

Our report "Review on Procurement Policy for Works Contracts and Consultancy Contract" published in March last year contained six measures to disincentivise tenderers from submitting significantly low prices. As the report explains, significantly low bids – in addition to help creating a vicious circle resulting in unhealthy working environment, long working hours and lower than deserved remuneration for younger engineers – inhibit innovative design, constrain materials selection and construction techniques and impact productivity enhancement. We are happy to see that the Development Bureau has already adopted some of our measures on consultancy contracts and the situation is improving. We hope similar measures on works contracts can be implemented soon!

To attract new engineers by rebranding our professional status among the public, especially students, the HKIE is committed to launching various initiatives to enhance our image. As you know, the President theme this year is “We are Proud to be Engineers”. I appeal all members to take pride in being professional engineers, and that we can work together to build the most powerful “Spirit Bomb” to fulfil the important mission of enhancing the status of our profession. I thus call on our members to:

1. Deliver our Services to the Community Professionally with Heart and Diligence;
2. Tell Good Engineering Stories; and
3. Nurture Talented Successors

I have detailed in my Presidential Address the three Attitudes needed when delivering professional services, viz. No Workers Mentality 不要抱打工仔心態; collaboration 協作; and embracing and enjoying challenges 擁抱挑戰・享受挑戰. These Attitudes, among other attributes for future leaders that I often advocate, will be much needed by our engineers as we enter a new golden age for our industry.

I am glad to see many of you wearing the “Proud to be Engineers” pin tonight. The pin may be small, but it carries important messages. 正所謂物輕情義重. You all should have heard our new theme song “傲程”. Produced by our young engineers, this dynamic MTV highlights the dedication of engineers through the multi-disciplinary engineering projects showcased in the video. Both the song and the pin are reminders of the vital and significant role played by engineers in the advancement and daily running of society, for the benefit of everyone, generations after generations. Though engineers should remain humble, they should still be proud of ones’ own profession in view of our unique and inspiring contribution we have made to Hong Kong and its people.

搶人才 Trawling talents is becoming a major mission for HKIE. In collaboration with Education Bureau, we created the “Engineers on Campus 工程伴理行” programme where the HKIE assigns engineer buddies to engage with teachers, parents and students, promote STEAM activities and provide career guidance on long term basis. While we are glad that around 50 schools are participating in the pilot scheme, my wish is to ultimately have a “One School One Engineer” programme. Another area we have been advocating is to review the secondary school curriculum and university admissions requirements to attract high school students to study STEAM and engineering-related programmes. Since this will take time, it won’t solve our immediate problem; but it must still be done. And our Task Force will give the government some recommendations soon on this topic.

Apart from making talks and attending career fairs in schools, I visited five universities last month to help students get a clearer understanding about the career path of engineers in Hong Kong and the role of engineering in society. My speech entitled “Engineering Career Prospects and Opportunities in Hong Kong” tell students that they have made the right choice by choosing a most noble profession with a promising future. This 搶人才 does not end in HK. I and SVP Barry flew to London last December to speak to about 100 students in Imperial College to convince them to work in HK after graduation.

After the success of the “What Do engineers do?” series last year, we produced a new series entitled “十載工情”, to tell the public what an engineer can expect within 10 years of graduation.

The Hong Kong Engineers Week 2023 (HKEW), our flagship event, was held from 3 to 11 March. Called “Our Future, We Engineer” it targeted the non-engineering community like youngsters, parents, teachers and even the media as it was not meant to be a 圍爐取暖 event among engineers. Attracting around 20 000 visitors and participants, this highly successful event featured engaging competitions, carnival, exhibition, ted talks, conference and fundraising cycling & run tailored to leave a lasting and positive impression of engineers among the community.

Meanwhile, you may have noticed that we are responding to media enquiries or attending live interviews more often. This is deliberate as we seek to enhance the visibility of the Institution and Engineers and ensure the public gets accurate information. We have also set up dedicated Task Forces to study policy subjects like new industrialisation, carbon zero policy, etc. to come up with new initiatives to help the government build a greener and smarter HK.

Conclusion

While the future is exciting for engineers, the road ahead won't be easy. If you are a mountain-biking passionate like I am, there is one thing you know. Going uphill on a steep slope is a painful challenge that not only test your physical capacity but your willpower even more so. But while the journey can be painful, it is rewarding once you reach the top. The pain goes away fast but the sense of accomplishment stays with you forever. The same can be said about the many engineering journeys and various commitments I have made in August last year; despite facing a slope made steeper by the two months lost to COVID.

We stand in an era with lots of new challenges. The industry needs smarter solutions, smarter entrepreneurs and smarter engineers committed to make our community a better place for all. We must work smarter to safely accelerate development, improve efficiency, and increase the quantity and quality of our work. Our ability to fulfill the mission vested upon us by the community and to develop a generation of new engineers is not a burden that we must fear, but a privilege we must embrace. I invite you all to pitch in and enjoy this challenge. After all, this is why we are proud to be Engineers!

Thank you!

Ir Aaron BOK Kwok-ming
President
The HKIE