



SYMPOSIUM TO CELEBRATE THE LIFETIME CONTRIBUTIONS OF
PROFESSORS EMERITI TOM PAULAY AND BOB PARK

A salute to Professor Emeritus Bob Park

Gavin Cormack

I feel honoured to give, on your behalf, this tribute to Bob. I have for many years valued highly his gift to me of friendship and professional support as I know have so many of you.

We are today celebrating an Institution.

An institution whose value and importance you have testified to by your presence in such numbers.

We would all, I think, agree that a society's prosperity and longevity depends on the soundness of its institutions.

What is this Institution that we value so much? How did it come into being? Why is it so important?

Well, firstly, it is formed by the elements we represent:

As researchers, teachers, designers, constructors, suppliers, specifiers, or supervisors. Together we make up a coherent, well informed and productive Institution. Each of us draws a degree of support and knowledge from the others that helps each of us. We are integrated by our many channels of communication.

It is this Institution that has led the development of the concrete industry and the structural engineering profession in New Zealand.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "an institution is merely the lengthening of one man's shadow".

That man is Bob Park. He has led the creation of our unique Institution.

Unique because our open, enquiring, self critical professional teamwork does not exist elsewhere.

To appreciate the magnitude of what has been accomplished, we need to look back.

When Bob graduated, New Zealand was effectively a state controlled, centrally planned society. All significant decisions were made by government. Even the engines that the state owned international airline would put into their planes were decided by the Prime Minister.

For civil engineering virtually all major projects – their expenditure, design, construction and maintenance – were controlled by government employed engineers. They set standards,

did most of the design, the professional training and had little, if any, accountability to the public. This was a mixed blessing.

There were some inspiring leaders, especially in the early days. But there was little personal or corporate accountability. Professional liability was rare. As the state controlled all, paid all, it also carried all risks. Contracts were administered autocratically. Innovation was hard work. Advancement in government did not go to innovators. Outputs were likewise mixed. In the civil engineering sector there were some outstanding achievements but also cases of deplorably conservative and costly design and decision making.

The engineering profession was not advancing.

The construction industry was segmented with little communication between the players.

Earthquake engineering was in its infancy, with little research, inadequate codes for materials, loads or for design. But certainly there was an increasing understanding of the challenges.

When Bob Park became Professor of Civil Engineering in 1978 he grasped the benefits that could flow if the barriers between central and local government agencies, contractors, designers, suppliers and the universities could be broken down. Benefits that would flow to his students, to researchers, and to the development of our profession.

The vehicle he used was what is now the NZ Concrete Society. This was the only learned society that provided connection with the key players. These connections were not, at that stage, based on common purpose, trust and team work.

Quite the reverse.

As chauffeur of this vehicle (he was President in 1975 and 1976) he used his skills to develop the needed interconnections. In particular, by the clarity and honesty of purpose of his ideas and his commitment. So the old personal antipathies and intellectual barriers were progressively broken down.

This was the start of a golden age in NZ engineering that Bob facilitated.

The conference of the Concrete Society became the yearly review of the advances in understanding in concrete design. Remember, in those days structural steel was mandated for multistorey buildings. There were many controversies – much more fundamental than those we have discussed today -

Was prestressed concrete sufficiently ductile?

Were unbonded cables acceptable?

How should we design and detail our concrete structures for increased ductility?

How could the integrity of beam column joints be maintained?

A useful coordination role was played by the Road Research Unit of the National Roads Board. Designers and researchers contributed their time to those meetings with enthusiasm as we all benefited from the interaction.

For Bob's Institution he gathered:

support in money and freely given time

But even more importantly

Real life experiences that connected research and education to industry needs

and

A forum for dissemination of knowledge.

David Hopkins earlier today presented the enormity of Bob's contribution.

In all of this he never forgot his students. He gave his time to them generously; Engineering School staff student interaction at Canterbury was legendary. The bar at Bush Inn was well known to many. He lobbied fiercely for his students employment. Many of us received calls from Bob seeking opportunities for his students, and enquiries as to their progress.

His work on code writing committees and with international committees like FIP did much to build knowledge of, and respect for, New Zealand achievements. Always he epitomised thoroughness, friendliness and clarity.

I remember John Hollings saying to me many years ago. "If experts cannot describe their concepts clearly, it is because they are either lazy or they are no expert."

Bob's presentations are always models of clarity, of easy comprehension. They are always a highlight of any conference.

I remember but one occasion when Bob was an also ran. We had written a joint paper on the use of precast concrete in seismic resistant design for the 1988 FIP symposium in Jerusalem. The venue, if not the topic, had inspired a large interested and friendly audience. Bob was, however, totally upstaged.

The opening address was by Shimon Peres, at that time joint prime minister of Israel. He spoke for an hour, giving his historical perspective of the Middle East, of his vision that there was a window of opportunity for peace for Israel, and for harmony in the Middle East. It was an erudite, emotional and compelling oration that none of us present will ever forget.

Regrettably, he was wrong. Nonetheless, his words still resonated in the minds of all present more strongly than precast concrete buildings, important though they are, would ever do.

Interestingly, it is now – 15 years later – that Shimon Peres' seeds of hope appear at last to have found fertile ground. I certainly hope this is so.

In the words of the citation when Bob won the IPENZ 2000 Millennium Award, "his generous and unstinting efforts to pass on his knowledge" has led to the enormous respect in which he is held in so many countries.

In China they even paid him the compliment of a pirated, totally unauthorised translation and publication of his and Tom's seminal text book of 1975.

Bob's generous response was, I am sure, unparalleled. He went to China to give lectures that promoted the work of the pirates. Always for him and Tom it was the advancement of knowledge that was the priority. Not the opportunity for commercial gain.

This is a professional gathering to which we are delighted to welcome Bob's family. But it would not be complete without reference to his wife Kathy. She gave him tremendous support and would have been very pleased and proud of the honour we are paying Bob today.

So we honour Bob tonight for so much.

For his friendship, his enthusiasm, his loyalty to his students, his determination to lift understanding, and the high standards he set for all of us.

We are humbled by his spirit. It has not been easy for him. He has suffered severe illness on more than one occasion from which he has emerged unbowed.

His motivation has not been personal aggrandisement, nor status, nor wealth, but a genuine commitment to public service.

It is the nobility of his ideals, his indomitable determination that has led to the building of the Institution to which we today have paid our respects.

Long may it prosper!