

A history of IPWEA

Early days

Early records show that the Victorian Institute of Engineers was first established in 1883. At a meeting held 5 June 1912, it expressed grave concerns that another body, the Institute of Municipal Engineers, had just been formed that same month in competition, with the mandate of providing scientific and literary activities.

In 1905, under the shadow of the impending Shires Act, a group of far-sighted engineers representing local government and the major public works authorities in NSW joined together to form a professional association.

The Local Government Act of 1906 empowered councils to appoint ‘servants’ – engineers and town clerks – who were required to possess a valid certificate of qualification.

From the earliest days, councilors and aldermen (they were all men in those days) sought and received advice from the person they respectfully addressed as Mr Engineer (because this role was also invariably held by a male).

New Zealand joins – almost!

In October 1909, the Association became known as The Institute of Local Government Engineers of Australasia. An inaugural conference was held with the secretary George Taylor – a legendary figure in the establishment and recognition of the profession of engineering in Australia – and President J M Smail.

New Zealand was represented by Mr R W Richards, engineer/clerk of Dunedin, but due to the impact of World War I, a formal alliance with New Zealand did not proceed.

This new organisation was one of the initiating organisations which, on January 1, 1919, brought into existence The Institution of Engineers, Australia. The title ‘The Local Government Engineers’ Association of NSW was proclaimed in 1920 and in the same year, the Association was registered as a trade union, to become LGEA NSW.

In 1922 the Association changed its name to the Local Government Engineers Association. The NSW association continued as a combined professional organisation and trade union.

LGEA Victoria was formed in October 1959 by six engineers at the Vines Imperial Hotel in Melbourne (the title and constitution being formally adopted in March 1960).

Then followed: LGEA South Australia (1959), LGEA Tasmania (1970), LGEA Western Australia (1970), and lastly LGEA Queensland (1972).

ARRB involvement

The establishment of these state associations required only a focal location and sufficiently dedicated engineers to bring into operation a national association. This was provided by a newly formed body in its own right, The Australian Road Research Board (ARRB).

ARRB was created in 1960 through the initiative of the various state road authorities. The involvement of local government engineers in the operation of the ARRB Board was introduced by the then-Commissioner for Queensland Main Roads, Mr C N Barton at the first Board conference, held in Canberra in 1962.

Following the broadening of the objectives of the Board, the Local Government Technical Committee was formed in 1969, which provided the opportunity for engineers from all states to meet regularly and initiate and pursue the concept of an Australia-wide association.

Engineers including Peter Parkinson (Vic), Amos Machlin (WA), Ray Moore (Qld), Keith Mitchell (SA), Rod Menzies (Tas), John Lindsay and Bob Veale (NSW) and, of course, Keith Wood (Vic) were instrumental in organising a meeting at the seventh ARRB conference at Flinders University, Adelaide.

Commencing in 1974 and, again with the support of the Board, principally through Executive Director Dr Max Lay, the Australian Council of Local Government Engineers Association was officially formed at the eighth ARRB Conference held at the University of Western Australia, Perth in August 1976.

The inaugural office bearers were Peter Parkinson, Vic (Treasurer), Keith Wood, Vic (Secretary) and Ted Hooper, NSW (President). Keith Wood was appointed as Executive Director from 1977-1995.

The representatives of each state met regularly and pursued the objectives of the new Australian Council with vigor and a very real pride in the fledgling organisation.

Soon after the formation of the Australian Council of Local Government Engineers (ACLGE), the Institution of Engineers, Australia realised that, at last, the opportunity was available to obtain a more direct relationship with local government engineers.

After initial discussions with the President and Secretary of the ACLGE Council in August and November 1979, the National Committee of Local Government Engineering was formed and had its first meeting in Canberra on March 20, 1980.

National conferences a roaring success

The formation of the National Committee brought about the initial test, perhaps the coming of age, of the ACLGE Council, with the first national conference held in Adelaide in August 1981. This was organised by the LGEA South Australia, in conjunction with the National Committee.

The conference was an outstanding success and set the standard for the national August conferences to follow: Brisbane (1983), Melbourne (1985), Perth (1987), Sydney (1989), Hobart (1991), Adelaide (1993), Gold Coast (1995), Melbourne (1997), Sydney (1999), Perth (2001), Hobart (2003), Adelaide (2005), Cairns (2007), Melbourne (2009), Canberra (2011), Darwin (2013), Rotorua (2015), Perth (2017) and Hobart (2019).

A direct outcome of the success of the national conferences occurred in 1984 when the Australian Council agreed to initiate the National Foundation for Local Government Engineering, to provide for scholarships “for corporate members of the state associations to undertake study/or investigation into subjects of professional interest both in Australia and overseas”. The initial trustees were Arthur Runge (Vic), Ross MacKenzie (Vic) and Ted Hooper, Chairman (NSW). Following changes to legislative and taxation requirements, as well as difficult economic constraints, The National Foundation was eventually closed in 2016.

The Australian Council of Local Government Engineers grew in stature, being fully recognised by Federal Government as a peak industry body representing the public and private engineering infrastructure management and service professionals.

A list of national Past Presidents is a who’s who of the local government engineering and public works professionals.

In 1991, following Australia's decade of tumultuous industrial relations upheavals during the 1980s, competing organisational objectives saw the association in NSW split into two organisations. Other states were not impacted by the split in NSW.

The industrial trade union arm joined APESMA (now known as Professionals Australia). The professional arm and activities were established as the Institute of Municipal Engineering Australia (IMEA).

Don Sheffield was appointed as IMEA's National Executive Director from 1996-2000.

After a decade of working towards a common unified organisation, the organisation changed its name to The Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia Ltd (IPWEA) in 1999, following unanimous agreement from all the states. This change was made with "the express provision of establishing a national structure which encourages unity of membership and the efficient and effective management of the business of IPWEA Australia and the Divisions".

At a crossroads

The decision in 1999 proved to be momentous, as the national organisation was at a crossroads after the Victoria Division had reduced in numbers to become an interest group within the newly formed association of Local Government Professionals (LGPro).

Four future direction options were debated extensively among all the state Divisions: retain the status quo, follow Victoria with a national Local Government Professionals model, become a Technical Society of Engineers Australia, or develop a stronger association under a new IPWEA banner.

The decision was made to become both a Technical Society of Engineers Australia and to develop a national organisation unifying the Divisions under IPWEA. This remains the structure today.

Recent history

In 2000, Chris Champion was appointed as the first full-time paid CEO until his retirement from that role in 2015. Under Chris' leadership and to meet the objectives of the Board, IPWEA grew rapidly over the next 15 years from a reliance on membership fees to a diversified, economically viable company (limited by guarantee), providing much needed training and high-level, best practice resources to the public works industry. Divisions all benefitted from nationally consistent application of asset management principles, coordination, national leadership and economies of scale of operations.

IPWEA was now highly regarded as the peak professional body across a number of key portfolios, but most notably asset management.

After decades of close relations with IPWEA's public works counterparts in New Zealand, INGENIUM NZ, the NZ body voted to join IPWEA in 2014, specifically to access the services and support developed and provided by IPWEA Australia. INGENIUM NZ was renamed IPWEA NZ and given the status of a Special Division. As a result of this merger, the group organisation name was changed to the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australasia (IPWEA).

In 2015 Robert Fuller succeeded Chris as Australasian CEO. The IPWEA Australasia office shared premises with IPWEA NSW in Kent Street, Sydney until an expanding Australasian headquarters triggered the move to North Sydney in 2016. Chris was subsequently appointed part-time as Director International to build the overseas footprint of IPWEA.

With thanks to: Chris Little, Ted Hooper, Ross Moody and Chris Champion.