

IEEE/PES PRESIDENT JOHN ESTEY: TRADITIONAL AND TRUE

By Phill Feltham

Power engineers had predicted the blackout's arrival before the event actually occurred. Neglect of the electrical infrastructure — a possible cause of the blackout — has occurred because regulators and policy setters were not engineers and the engineering issues have not been a major part of the policymaking process, according to John Estey, the CEO of S&C Electric Company.

"The power engineering industry knew that blackouts were a certainty. The industry didn't know where, they didn't know when, they didn't know how big, but they knew that blackouts would happen," said Mr. Estey, a power engineer for 31 years and also the President of the IEEE Power Engineering Society.

"Just look at who we are depending on to analyze the cause of the blackout. It's not the regulators, it's not the legislators, it's certainly not the business people or the lawyers; it's the engineers. They're the only ones who know how to do it."

Mr. Estey said that legislators and regulators often do not understand the complexity of electricity. Many regulators, Mr. Estey said, have described electricity as a commodity, though in his opinion it should be considered a highly engineered, highly technical product.

"If you don't properly manage the generation/production or the transmission/distribution of electricity, you can kill people and cripple economies," he said.

The blackout, according to Mr. Estey, was not the breaking point, just another reminder that the policy setters can't create an environment without having some expertise present.

"Memories are short," he said. "This problem will be dealt with and then it will be on to some other fiasco. But I do think that a point has been made that you can't handle these systems lightly."

Mr. Estey said a lack of communication is a major cause of the current regulatory and legislative situation. Power engineers weren't effective in talking and

the policy setters weren't very good at listening.

"We need to find a way for engineers to speak up in public more about the issues and also to have engineers invited to the policymaking table," he said.

"There should be a lot more balance going forward but we have a long way to go in Canada, the United States and many countries around the world to get the regulatory, legislative, and technical perspectives all aligned properly."

Mr. Estey has been with S&C Electric since he graduated from Queen's University. He moved from Toronto to Chicago on a training program. He was only supposed to be in Chicago for five years, but that short period of time has already turned into 31 years.

When Mr. Estey first became a power engineer, he said the industry was too bureaucratic. He thought there were too many people working at utilities, but, in those days, he said workers always took pride in their job and were loyal to their organization.

Now, however, Mr. Estey said the pendulum has swung to the other side.

"Today, people try to do things well, but they are so stretched because of the shortage of people that it's a real struggle and loyalty has been damaged by the many downsizing programs."

The problem, Mr. Estey believes, is that over the last fifteen years, utilities have been under a lot of pressure to cut costs, and one end result was significant downsizing.

"When kids entered college in recent years, they didn't take power engineering because it was perceived as an older technology and there seemed to be few job opportunities."

Mr. Estey has worked for S&C his entire career. He stayed loyal to S&C



John Estey, CEO S&C Electric Company and President IEEE Power Engineering Society

because of the company's policies toward their employees. The S&C President wears with pride a gold pin which signifies 25 years with the company.

"People (who work at S&C) really value receiving things like this," he said. "I don't think you see that in a lot of publicly traded companies because they're too short sighted and treat the employee as expendable."

S&C Electric is a privately owned business. Mr. Estey said that S&C shares its profits with the employees. Loyalty starts with the company and Mr. Estey says that S&C endeavours to preserve the jobs of those who contribute to the success of the company. Doing so over the years has helped build employee loyalty to the company and a great many employees are committed to work at S&C for a long time.

"If the organization doesn't care about the employee, they are, in turn, not going to care about the company. We've developed a great loyalty amongst our folks because the company is loyal to them."

With respect to IEEE, Mr. Estey says

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he was a little hesitant before he became an IEEE member.

“When I first was in the industry, I thought IEEE behaved a little bit like a union. I thought they focused too much on employment issues,” he said. He later realized it’s easier to change something from the inside so Mr. Estey joined the group in 1987.

In 1991, Mr. Estey was asked to join the IEEE Power Engineering Society Governing Board.

In the end, Mr. Estey admitted he now has a much better appreciation for many of IEEE’s operations and has worked to achieve ways in which to deliver more value to members and their employers through IEEE activities.

Part of the IEEE’s reasons for holding huge exhibitions and conferences, for instance, is to create awareness of new technologies. Mr. Estey said that power engineering, once viewed as an old technology, is not considered that way now. Regulators and society in general are starting to realize that power engineers are important in making the systems work correctly.

As to power engineering today, it’s software, it’s computers, it’s power electronics. It’s a lot of exciting stuff that’s absolutely leading edge technology which is attracting people back.”

From a personal standpoint, Mr. Estey hasn’t designed any products since he was appointed S&C President by the son of one of S&C’s co-founders, Chairman Emeritus John Conrad. Mr. Estey said in his early days, he enjoyed performing protection and coordination studies, which involved figuring out the organization of system protective devices. The challenge was to ensure that short circuits were eliminated while keeping interruptions, caused by the tripping of protective devices, to the least amount of the system as possible.

“It was one of the things I did when I first came into the industry and I still like it even though it’s become eas-

ier through computerization. With computers, you can move the curves around on the screen and figure out how to get the relays coordinated one with the other and the fuses to coordinate with the relays.”

Though Mr. Estey is passionate about what he does at S&C and in the IEEE Power Engineering Society, every passion has its price. Mr. Estey admitted his only regret was not spending more time with his family over the years.

“No one on their death bed ever said, ‘Gee, I wish I spent more time at the office’,” he laughed. “If anything got shortchanged along the way, it was my family, but they’ve been good and very understanding. I’ve got a great wife and two great kids.”

Mr. Estey has encouraged his two kids to follow their dreams. Mr. Estey’s daughter just graduated from college and is now with the Peace Corps in Honduras for two and a half years. His son is in California studying business.

“I tell my kids, you really have to choose something you like,” he said. “In the end, you have to measure success, not based on the money you made, but how much you enjoyed what you were doing.” **ET**



Mr. Estey has worked for S&C Electric his entire career. At the recent IEEE/PES T&D Conference and Exposition in Dallas, he demonstrates one of S&C Electric’s products displayed at the company’s booth.