

Governing Council's 40th Anniversary

By Kelly Rankin

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the University of Toronto's Governing Council – it was established by the University of Toronto Act on July 1, 1972 and held its first meeting three days later on July 4.

The President of the day, John Evans, later said that the Act had “erected a parliament without a tradition, without a speaker, and without rules.”

Governing Council is a unique structure that combines both academic and financial oversight in a single body that includes faculty, staff, students, alumni and government appointees. The Bulletin spoke with members of the Council both past and present about the anniversary, what it means to serve on U of T's Governing Council, and the Council's recent major governance review.

Three Ontario premiers have served on the Council since its inception July 1, 1972: William “Bill” Davis (1999-2008), Bob Rae (1999-2002) and former U of T Chancellor David Peterson (1999-2006, as Chancellor from 2006-2012). And each is not only an alumnus but a committed volunteer who has served U of T in a variety of ways.

For example, Davis and Rae both played important roles in the creation of the Governing Council – and both returned later to serve on the Council.

Rae, a student in 1971, was a member of the Commission on University Government - the committee responsible for bringing about the Council.

Davis, Premier of Ontario from 1971 to 1985, authored the *University of Toronto Act*. While others describe him as a major force behind the legislation he declines the credit with characteristic modesty.

“All I did was walk it into the House,” said Davis.

Designed to draw on the strengths of a diverse university community, Council reflects the insights and experience of a wide range of governors – and participants take their responsibilities seriously.

“Governance is about much more than offering opinions,” said Professor Ellen Hodnett, faculty governor and chair of the Academic Board. “It’s about approval and oversight as well as advice, all aimed at strengthening the academic, student, and business affairs of the University.

“It’s an opportunity to ‘give back’ to a University which has been a wonderful place for me to both get a graduate education and have a career in teaching and research.”

Those sentiments are echoed by student governor Chirag Variawa. Serving on council while pursuing a graduate degree has been “a challenging, yet very rewarding, experience,” Variawa said, adding he appreciates “my ability to have candid discussions with the different estates and representatives on Governing Council including the President, Provost, and Vice-Provosts.”

From the beginning, governors have taken steps to ensure that the Council would evolve with the university. To date, there have been five extensive reviews of the university's governance processes, including the most recently completed review.

"The review process is about reflecting on the way Council works and making necessary adjustments to ensure it continues to function within the principles of good governance and that it remains responsive to the evolving needs of the university. It demonstrates the capacity of governance at U of T to continue to evolve," said Louis Charpentier, secretary of the Governing Council.

Recommendations from the recent Task Force on Governance, such as a framework and timeline for tri-campus governance, are in the process of being implemented said P.C. Choo, an administrative staff governor and member of the Task Force.

"The fact that Governing Council in its present state is celebrating its 40th year is a testament to the care that went into its development," said Richard Nunn, chair of the Governing Council. "These reviews are crucial."

"We have recently been through a fairly extensive overhaul of our practices building on the *Task Force on Governance Report* that was part of the university's 2030 visioning exercise," he added. "These practices are already helping Governing Council function more effectively in the current context."

"For the past four decades, the guidance, oversight and leadership the Governing Council has provided have been essential to the rise and success of Canada's largest and most prominent University," said President David Naylor in his remarks at the 40th anniversary event.

"This success has been sustained by a collaborative relationship among governance, administration, the collegium, and all of the estates in the U of T community. This relationship is the backbone of our unique unicameral system," he added.

"No doubt, the Council's efforts at improvement will continue, and President Evans, if he were to return to the Council Chamber, would be able to comment on an effective governing body with strong rules and a proud tradition – and only forty years after its establishment," said Nunn.