

Change

Written by GL Smith
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This month, continuing with the theme of change, I would like to talk about change, generally, and then specifically in the context of the Southern African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy.

The fourteen chemists and metallurgists who gathered on 24 March 1894 at the North-Western Hotel in Pritchard Street, Johannesburg to form the Chemical and Metallurgical Society of South Africa – forerunner of the SAIMM – met because they had a need, a need to share knowledge and understanding. Why was this need so pressing? In 1888, the MacArthur/Forrest patent for 'Improvements in obtaining gold and silver from ores and compounds' was registered. This patent essentially covered the application of dilute sodium cyanide solution to recover gold, and as you well know this was the technology that would unlock the real potential of the Witwatersrand gold deposits, discovered only two years previously. This technology was fundamentally changing the nature of the gold industry, and of the chemical and metallurgical professions.

This need to share knowledge in order to more effectively pursue our professions has not changed over our 118 year history, and it is currently reflected in the Institute's objectives, to:

- Identify, represent, and promote the interests and needs of its members
- Disseminate scientific and technical knowledge to the benefit of the mining and metallurgical industries
- Represent the interests of professionals in the mining and metallurgical industries.

Now let's talk about change.

We are currently living in a period where a convergence of events is reshaping the global economy. For example:

- Emerging regions such as Africa, Brazil, China, and India have overtaken the traditional Western economies as the engines of global growth
- New technologies have created new industries, disrupted old ones, and spawned communication networks of incredible speed and coverage
- Global crises – be they economic or environmental – seem to erupt at ever shorter intervals. 2008 saw the global financial crisis, and 2012 the European Community financial crisis!

In South Africa we have a step-change in labour dynamics in the minerals industry, with spillover across other commodities and industries. The Marikana tragedy has shown that the inequalities that are a harsh reality of our society are unsustainable. Continued unrest around service delivery and other issues is now daily news. In essence, the economic expectations created in the establishment of a democratic South Africa are simply not being realized by the majority of people.

Simply put, we are in an age of upheaval, where these events and others have profound implications for individuals and organizations. The rate of change is astounding – or is it?

Let's go back to the late 1800s when our institute was founded.

The First South African War between the British colonizing forces and the Boers of the

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Transvaal Republic ran from 1880 to 1881. In 1886 gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand, and in 1888 the MacArthur/Forrest patent was registered. In 1892 the first train steamed into Johannesburg from Cape Town – a critical link for commerce, but the greatest impact was in making the Witwatersrand readily accessible, shortening a journey of many weeks to days. In 1894, Mahatma Gandhi formed the Natal India Congress, and the railway between Lourenco Marques (Maputo) and Johannesburg was opened. There was also the inaugural South African cricket tour of England – we won 12 matches, drew 7, and lost 5 ... and of course the SAIMM was founded.

1895 saw the infamous Jameson Raid, which heightened tensions between the British and the Transvaal Republic. In 1896 British Colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain invited Paul Kruger to London to discuss the security of the Transvaal; Ethiopia, under Emperor Menelik II, defeated the invading Italian army in the Battle of Adwa; and the Lumière brothers' demonstration of projected moving photographic images took place in Alexandria – the movie industry was born. The rinderpest outbreak of 1897 decimated cattle across Southern Africa. To round off the century, Paul Kruger was sworn in as president of the Transvaal Republic in 1898, and he immediately allied the Republiek with the Orange Free State to bolster strength against the British. Tensions increased, and the Second South African War broke out in 1899 and continued until 1902, with long-lasting effects on the nation.

So, if we think we are having a difficult period, in reality the conflict and the rate of change is no different to that time. Each generation faces similar challenges – it is how we respond to them, as individuals and as an organization, that makes a difference.

Now let's briefly look at the SAIMM and change.

Despite far-reaching changes in our operating environment over the last 118 years, we have managed to continue to meet the fundamental needs of our members. We have grown in membership to around 4000 from a low of 2480 in 2003; roughly 54 per cent of the membership is under 45 years of age, with an improving gender balance; apart from the SA-based branches, we now have viable branches in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Zambia, with the DRC developing; financially, our turnover has doubled since 2008; we held 15 conferences last Council year; and since 1894 we have published around 4227 papers, of which 2930 are now on our website.

Perspective is important. Despite the massive shifts in the global economy and their impact on the minerals and metals industry, despite the shifts in labour relations and politics in our country, we, as a nation, as companies, communities, families, and individuals will work our way through the current turmoil and move to a different state of entropy. During this transition the SAIMM will evolve and maintain its relevance to members. To do this, we need your participation and feedback – through communication to me or the Manager, through volunteering for conference sub-committees and through continued support of our events.