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Opinion. Philipson on the ACS's problems

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Philipson - Still an ACS member

What is happening in the Australian Computer Society is a tragedy, for the organisation and for the IT industry.

Australia needs a strong and vibrant professional body to represent the interests of the industry and the people working within it. For 50 years it had one.

Today it does not. Instead it has a bickering group of self-centred individuals, many of whom have their own interests at heart, rather than those of the wider profession.

This concerns me deeply. I am a member of the ACS, but my real allegiance is to the IT industry, which has been my professional life. I started on the technical side in my early 20s but for most of the last 40 plus years I have been a journalist, market researcher and analyst observing the industry as much as participating in it.

In that time I have had a lot to do with the ACS. As long ago as the 1980s I edited its monthly publication, and then in the 1990s I was founding editor of its current magazine, Information Age. Four years ago the ACS commissioned me to write the first ever definitive history of the Australian computer industry, which helped me understand the Society even more.

I have been reporting on the current shenanigans over the last year largely out of a sense of duty and because I believe all this should be on the historical record. I am astounded that IT press – except my friend James Riley at InnovationAus – has not covered it, though that may be a symptom of how irrelevant the ACS has become.

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All this has given me what I would like to think is a unique perspective on the matter. I know most of the individuals involved, and I have followed the issues, because of my profession, more closely than most.

I have been astonished at the number of senior industry figures who have told me they were once ACS members, but they have left because the organisation was not offering value or because of their disgust at the direction it has taken. A great many important and influential people, who should be central to the ACS's continued role, have abandoned it.

It really is a great shame what has happened. But it is not too late to fix things.

The election of Dr Ian Oppermann as President in March of this year is the main reason for my optimism. He is an outstanding figure, not aligned with any faction within the organisation, and widely respected for his intelligence, work ethic and impartiality.

If anyone can fix things he can. If he can't, the ACS is doomed. At least it is doomed as an organisation that represents the interests of IT professionals in Australia. It may well succeed as a commercial organisation, which is the direction in which it is headed, but that is exactly what many people are concerned about.

The key issue at the moment is whether the ACS should be a commercial organisation promoting the interests of the industry or whether it should be a professional society promoting the interests of its members. This raises the question as to whether these two aims are compatible.

I believe they are. But not under the current leadership. One of the big sticking points in the current debate is the role played by ACS senior management, and in particular CEO Andrew Johnson, former President Yohan Ramasundara, and Company Secretary Andrew Madry.

These three individuals are the architects of the current debacle. Their unethical, possibly illegal, and most certainly reprehensible behaviour in calling an Extraordinary General Meeting in October last year, and in the irregularities surrounding the stacking of the vote at that meeting, was the catalyst that led to the current problems.

Their subsequent arrogance and secretiveness has added fuel to the fire. Does the word 'hubris' mean anything to you?

The judgement handed down by the court that annulled the meeting and the vote could scarcely have been more damning of their actions. The presiding judge, Justice Wigney, was previously a barrister specialising in white-collar crime, and he can recognise a rat when he smells one.

In a truly commercial organisation with an independent board it is likely all three of them would have been sacked immediately on the basis of Justice Wigney's judgement. It is an indictment of the ACS Management committee, which they dominate, that they still hold their positions.

It is hard to see a way forward while they remain in power. Ian Oppermann certainly has his work cut out. My interview with him last Friday (/it-industry/keep-it-civil,-says-oppermann.html) was via Zoom, and he was visibly uncomfortable with some of the questions I asked. He was aware that he was speaking on the record, and hinted that there were some personal views that he was holding back.

Ashley Goldsworthy's comments are not helpful, as Dr Oppermann said in the interview. Calling Dr Oppermann's behaviour cowardly is itself cowardly, or at the very least unnecessary and unhelpful.

I think Roger Clarke's behaviour throughout has been exemplary. He can be a prickly individual, but he is a man of great integrity and courage, and his role in forming and leading the group fighting for the ACS they believe in has been outstanding. He has really gone out on a limb.

I hope this matter is resolved quickly. Dr Oppermann is talking about a twelve month timeframe. That is probably realistic, but the concern is that over that period more damage will be done.

Sort it out, guys.


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