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Open warfare over 'disingenuous' ACS

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Editorial Director

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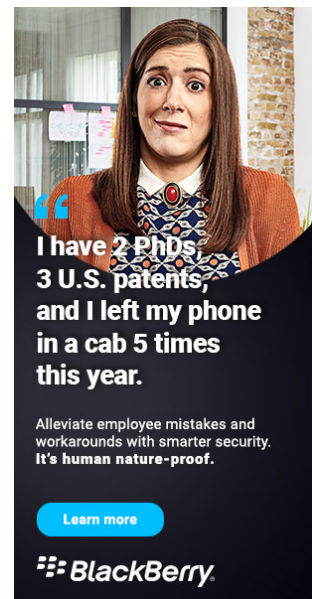
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The seething hostilities at the Australian Computer Society between a large contingent of long-time members and senior fellows and the executive management team over plummeting memberships and accusations of financial mismanagement has spilled over into open warfare.

From accusations that senior management handed out proxy forms to staff to participate in the extraordinary general meeting that sought to change the corporate structure of the society to charges of a lack of transparency over ACS spending, fights have opened up on a number of new fronts.

A meeting in Brisbane billed as a 'strategic update' was pilloried as a sham, with senior members claiming ACS chief executive Andrew Johnson had declined to answer basic questions about the general running of the society, the falling membership numbers, and the cost and rationale behind the acquisition of industry associations.

And these do not include the Federal Court-ordered discussions between the ACS and a group of senior members led by Roger Clarke.



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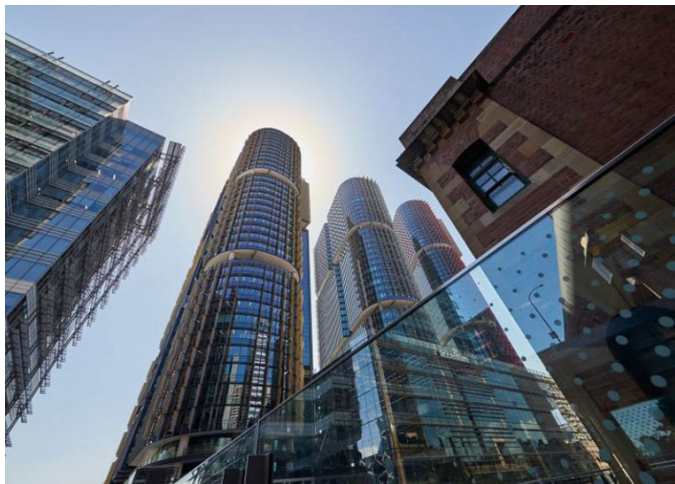
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Swish digs: The ACS headquarters at Barangaroo

A month and a half after the court issued damning findings against the ACS and its officers in relation a vote on changes to the society's corporate structure and two sides' lawyers – blue-chip firm Clayton Utz for the ACS and SBA Lawyers for Mr Clarke – are still negotiating process issues and no date has yet been agreed to conduct the discussions.

All of this is happening at a time when the ACS remains without an elected President, and no clear path for elections within the ACS' state organisations to be held in order to elect a new president.

The society had been caught out by the Federal Court ruling that the vote on its corporate restructure had been invalid (and the meeting itself found to be invalid). It did not hold scheduled state branch elections and had promised to provide members with detail on a way forward by mid-January but dates have not yet been set.

Long-time Queensland member Martin Lack, who has been tracking membership numbers in recent years, says traditional numbers have fallen by 40 per cent in the past five years from 20,468 to 12,320, while Professional Member numbers have dropped by 45 per cent from 8,155 to 4,756 over the same period.

The number of Associate Members, who have less rigorous qualification requirements, had declined by 30 per cent from 7,819 to 5,346 in the past five years, according to Mr Lack.

ACS NSW had the biggest reduction overall, with the total number of Professional Members in NSW falling 55 per cent compared to January 2015, Mr Lack said. The number of MACS in NSW fell by 67 per cent in that period.

The ratio of Professional Member in NSW was the lowest in the country at just 30 per cent of the traditional grouping. ACS's national executive team is based in Sydney.

Former ACS president and chief executive Ashley Goldsworthy – a

founding member of the society – has characterised the ACS response to queries related to its annual report as “disingenuous” and decried a lack of transparency on travel budgets and other significant line items.

Mr Goldsworthy had written to ACS management seeking clarification on specific costs ranging from details of the \$1,674,741 the society spend on travel and accommodation last financial year and greater detail of the \$2,363,202 spent on consultants.

He also sought clarity on how the \$20 million that had been moved from the ACS cash and cash equivalents had been invested. He had also queried the nature of a \$5,000 payment former ACS President Yohan Ramasundara had made at a Liberal Party fundraiser to acquire a biography of Winston Churchill written by former Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies.

The ACS management response declined to elaborate on any of the specific queries. It said in a statement that it had met all financial disclosure requirements and could not detail specific travel and accommodation expenses because of privacy restrictions.

While many ACS staff become members of the Australian Computer Society at the commencement of their employment, the ACS management told InnovationAus that staff did not have access to “any additional information” in relation to voting on the special resolution at the extraordinary general meeting last October, although it did say that proxy forms were printed out as a convenience for members in the Sydney office where the national staff are located.

Many startups founders who share space at ACS locations are also members as part of their participation with the society and have voting rights.

The resolution to enable a corporate restructure had been passed by a single vote last October before being declared invalid by the Federal Court. Just 747 members from a pool of around 10,000 eligible voted on the special resolution. These included potentially scores of members wither being paid by the ACS as staff or startups using subsidised rental space at ACS facilities.

Do you know more? Contact James Riley via [Email](mailto:james@innovationaus.com)

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