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Sunday, 05 July 2020 16:46



# Keep it civil, says Oppermann Featured

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By Graeme Philipson (/freelancer-sp-720/author/3737-graeme-philipson.html)

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Oppermann - We're working hard

## The President of the Australian Computer Society, Dr Ian Oppermann, has responded to trenchant criticism of his role with a plea for civility and patience.

Dr Oppermann has been criticised for inaction and cowardice by Professor Ashley Goldsworthy, an outspoken octogenarian who has been both President and CEO of the ACS. In an interview with iTWire last week (/it-industry/acs-not-responding,-says-goldsworthy.html) Professor Goldsworthy castigated Dr Oppermann for his failure to take stronger action to reconcile ACS management with a vocal group of influential dissidents who are unhappy with the direction of the organisation.

"I don't think Ashley's comments are helpful," Dr Oppermann told iTWire. "We need the conversation to be respectful. He's complaining about things not happening quickly enough, but that sort of language not only lowers the tone of the conversation but actually slows things down."

Dr Oppermann made his remarks in an interview with iTWire in response to Professor Goldsworthy's allegations. He said that it may not be apparent, but that he is working extremely hard to reform the ACS and work towards a new constitution which takes into account the concerns of Professor Goldsworthy and the informal dissident group of which is a member, which calls itself 'Rescue your ACS'.

The feud within ACS came to a head last December when the group, led by Dr Roger Clarke, won a decisive court battle (/it-industry/acs-loses-major-court-battle-over-irregular-vote.html) against ACS with the judgement which annulled an October 2019 Extraordinary General Meeting which had voted by the narrowest of margins to change the ACS constitution.

Since that victory the group has been pressing the ACS to take its views into account. It hoped ACS's initial intransigence would change with the election of Dr Oppermann as President in March 2020.

"These things take time," said Dr Oppermann. "Ashley of all people should know that we have to

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abide by the existing rules before we can change them. I know people are frustrated, but it's actually very difficult to change things. It is ironic, but the main thing slowing down change is the existing set of rules.

"We had a Congress meeting in June, which Roger Clarke addressed, outlining his group's grievances. At that meeting we agreed on a lot, which I have shared publicly. It's very complex and we are working hard on the things we need to do to make it work.

"Believe it or not, one of the things we have to sort out is online voting. It's absolutely insane that we don't currently have an online voting system and people have to turn up in Sydney to vote. We need to fix that, and we will."

A key criticism of the Rescue your ACS group has been the self-perpetuating nature of the Management Committee, which has very restrictive rules on who can vote and who can stand.

"The current rules do favour repeat appearances from a number of people," Dr Oppermann admitted. "The same faces keep showing up. One of the things we were trying to do under the 2019 draft of the constitution was to limit maximum lifetime service to six years. The new rules which we were trying to introduce would help address these concerns."

And what of criticism of the current management team, and in particular CEO Andrew Johnson, who were roundly criticised for their behaviour in the judgement handed down in the court case last December?

"That's a good question. It's undeniable that it was not well done. That's in the public domain and there is no way to shy away from it. We have rules and one thing I have committed to is transparency. There are some processes running at the moment to see whether there was any wrongdoing in any way."

What of Roger Clarke's attempts to have an independent arbitrator or committee examine these issues to try to resolve the differences between ACS management and the Rescue your ACS group?

"I had hoped we would get to some conclusion about how that would work on the day of Congress. We had a big debate about it. We are not sure a small group is the best way to do it - there needs to be consensus from the wider membership.

"We need widespread commentary and input on the things that matter most. We have agreed to use an electronic platform for people to highlight what they really are concerned about with the 2019 draft constitution, with a non ACS person or group to moderate the conversation. Then we need to feed it back in and do it again, and again if necessary.

"We want to make it as independent as possible, but at the same time we need to abide by our existing rules. And at the moment the rules say that the Management Committee and the Congress are the decision makers, and they are bound by the rules. We have to ensure that everything we do is appropriate."

One of Professor Goldsworthy's key criticisms has been that ACS spent money inappropriately on travel, attendance at international conferences, membership of bodies such as the World Economic Forum, and in the acquisition of the assets of other professional bodies. He has repeatedly asked for detail on these expenditures. Why are they not forthcoming?

"There is a balance between the privacy of the individuals involved versus the transparency," said Dr Oppermann, one of Australia's leading privacy advocates. "I'm still working on that. It will take a bit of time because there is additional information we need to go through."

One key expense that Prof Goldsworthy mentioned was the amount the ACS spent defending its court case against the rescue your group last year. Surely the membership has a right to know this amount?

Dr Oppermann directed me to the Member Area of the ACS website, which contains a summary of all monthly Management Committee meetings. Item 4.5 of the report on the January 2020 meeting states:

"The Management Committee agreed to close the current transition to a Company Limited by Guarantee Project with current expenditure off \$406,000. A new project would be needed once the results from the court proceedings are known."

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It is unclear what proportion of this amount is legal fees, and whether further fees will be accrued, given that the resolution referred to uncertainty as to the court proceedings, which were not concluded until the following month.

Whatever the case, it would seem the cost to ACS of the court case brought by Roger Clarke were substantial. We can assume the figure includes Dr Clarke's legal fees of \$175,000, which the ACS was ordered to pay, and it is fair to assume that ACS's costs were more.

Finally, probably the most important issue. ACS professional membership has declined severely over the last few years, by almost two thirds. At the same time ACS has been publicly quoting growing membership figures that have been inflated by associate and nonprofessional members as the definitive figure. What is the ACS doing about the decline in professional membership?

"It's a real concern, I can tell you" said Dr Oppermann. "It's something we talk about all the time. And it's something we're constantly looking at. What is the value proposition is for members, and in particular professional members?"

"I guarantee you it's a really important issue, and that we are working on it and. We need to get past the current political issues and focus on the members. What can we offer them that we are not offering them now? What should we focus on?"

"There are different value proposition for different types of member but the professional members are extremely important and we need to make sure their needs are met."

All fine words. But that has been one of the main criticisms of the Rescue your ACS group. So far it's all been words. What happens next?

"We've outlined a plan. Next we need commentary on implementing that plan. I welcome a diversity of views, I really do. I've had quite a few conversations with Roger Clarke, and also spoken with Ashley.

"I don't want groupthink. But I do want everyone to agree with the process so that when we actually carry it out we all march in the same direction. So let's have the debate. That's what we're doing now."

"Let's have the debate about what we're going to do and how we're going to do it. Sure, we can argue about the issues that matter. But then we need to get on and do it."

And how long while that take?

"We need to be realistic. At the recent Congress meeting, we talked about four months to determine the shape of the new constitution. Even this evening, I was working on this. The sequencing really is very complex.

"Let's work back from the goal of becoming a Company Limited by Guarantee by July next year, which I think is a reasonable timeframe to get all the changes done - agreeing on our direction, developing and voting on a new constitution, and getting things in place.

"We need to organise electronic voting. We need to give three month's notice for a special meeting. We need to give other notice periods. If you want to genuinely have a draft of the new constitution, then it needs to be open for consultation for at least a month. It is quite a long process.

"The comments from Ashley and others that we are not doing anything our untrue and really surprising. We are doing a lot but we are limited by our current rules in the number of steps we can take at the same time.

"Real change takes time, and deservedly so. That's what I'm really committed to. We need a proper consultation period, not just a group of people offering up their own answers.


"Since being elected President I've had an opportunity to speak to quite a few people. We had a constructive meeting in Congress in June. I really think we're not halfway there, we're 95% of the way there in terms of the process we need to follow.

"So let's have the debate. It can't be one loud voice, we have to care for all members' interests. Everyone wants to be heard, which is tricky. Using a platform to do that, using independent moderators with as little bias as possible, is what we committed to at Congress. I intend to make sure that happens.

"And I'd like to make a personal request to Ashley Goldsworthy to keep things civil."

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Dr Oppermann has committed to a further interview with iTWire one month from now to discuss progress.

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