

Personal Views on BCS EGM

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Disclaimer. Although I am a member of the BCS Council¹ and attended its most recent meeting², the views here are those of me as an individual. Although I have consulted other BCS members, some active and some disillusioned, and some current officers, the views expressed here are mine, not theirs.

1 Background

The formal call for the Extraordinary General Meeting can be found at <http://yourfuture.bcs.org/>. The seven resolutions proposed are as follows.

- * The first three proposed by the requisitioners.
 1. A vote of 'no confidence' in the current Trustee Board.
 2. A vote of 'no confidence' in the Chief Executive, David Clarke.
 3. A vote to suspend any further expenditure on the 'transformation programme' until there is full, open and transparent disclosure of all financial accounting relating to this programme to date.
- * Three ordinary and one special resolution proposed by the Trustee Board.
 4. That BCS Professional Members endorse the strategy adopted by the Trustee Board of developing BCS into one of the world's leading professional institutes for IT.
 5. That BCS Professional Members support the decision of the Trustee Board to invest some of the substantial reserves of BCS in the new programmes proposed to implement the strategy.
 6. That BCS Professional Members have confidence in the Trustees and the CEO and support the work they have done and continue to do, to make BCS relevant for both today and for the future.

¹These days often, though probably incorrectly, referred to as "Advisory Council", to distinguish it from the pre-2004 Charter, when Council was the legal governing body, a rôle now fulfilled by the Trustee Board.

²My notes are at <http://staff.bath.ac.uk/masjhd/BCS/Council2010June13.pdf>.

7. [Special Resolution (Please note that this resolution is conditional upon Ordinary Resolutions 4, 5 and 6 being approved)] That subject to such alterations as the Lords of the Privy Council may require, the Bye-laws appearing in the Schedule to the Royal Charter be amended as follows: In Bye-law 29 delete 'fifty Professional Members' and substitute 'two per cent of the Professional Membership at the date of receipt of requisition.'

2 Why did JHD get involved with BCS

He stood twice for election to Council, basically because he was dissatisfied with what BCS was doing, or, more accurately, what it was *not* doing. It seemed (and still seems) to JHD that the profession (see Appendix A) is in trouble.

- the HMRC 'lost data' fiasco of 2007, and the pretty weak Government response to it, was an opportunity for BCS to demonstrate its presence: it should (as JHD stated in his 2008 manifesto) have caused the question How many of HMRCs 37 new Data Guardians are CITP to be asked in Parliament. Though the BCS has a 'Personal Data Guardianship Code', it does little to ask BCS members to publicise it in their daily life.
- BCS is often seen as irrelevant to the fresh graduate, and only matters 5–10 years later, when they are competing with other professionals for more general promotion. I stated in 2008 that BCS should work with universities to do five years on recruitment drives among their alumni. Though this has attracted favourable attention from an individual member of the BCS staff, and from a BCS Vice-President, as far as I can tell nothing formally is being done.
- University recruitment to Computing courses has been in free-fall. Departments are closing, and not just those in 'weak' universities. Members of both Oxford and Cambridge have expressed their concerns about student recruitment in Computer Science to JHD. While the reasons for this *may be* complex³, BCS's inertia does not bode well for the future of the profession.

3 How did we get into this mess?

For mess it surely is. The requisitioners include a (recent) Past President of the Society and various current or ex-members of Council, I believe including two ex-Trustees. Hence it is hard to dismiss this call as the work of a collection of cranks.

There has been quite a bit of to-and-fro in the debate, not all as well-mannered as one would like, and it is hard for JHD, as one only just come

³Some of them, though, are pretty simple. A colleague reported that his daughter to refused to do CS 'A'-level, despite an excellent GCSE, with the remark "but I already know about spreadsheets".

onto the Council, and not a Trustee, to discern the truth. It's also not clear that "truth" exists: the requisitioners say that they requested this information several times, but it's only minuted once. Both statements could well be true. Harder to square are

Explanatory Note "Those BCS members who have called the EGM don't feel that this is an appropriate strategy and argue that BCS should go back to the pre1984 model"

Requisitioners' site (<http://bcsreform.wikispaces.com/EGM+message>) "We are NOT people who want to put the clock back, to return the BCS to what it was thirty years ago, as has been suggested by the people opposing the EGM motions, notably the President and CE".

One way of seeing the malaise, which occurred to JHD as a Territorial Army officer, is that BCS seems *in practice* to have lost touch with the fact that it is, very largely, an organisation of *volunteers*. Such organisations require a greater degree of explanation of what's going on than other organisations. Cascade management, and "it was explained at the Members' Forum"⁴, do not work well here.

BCS is also a pretty diverse organisation, or collection of organisations such as branches and special interest groups, and JHD has heard a lot of muttering about "one size fits all" constitutions being "imposed". It seems clear to JHD that many members *feel* they are being neglected. I note Jeremy Bennett's⁵ comments at <http://network.bcs.org/group/212/discussions/530>, particularly suggestion three.

4 What do I feel about the transformation

In truth, it is hard to say. Part of me wants to say "what transformation" — I haven't noticed any greater visibility of BCS, or any greater attention being paid to the issues that caused me to stand. Conversely, one could well argue that it is "early days yet". The process of transformation is certainly taking its time

JHD first heard about the Academy of Computing on 21 September 2009, in an e-mail stating "The full details of operation of the Academy will be worked out over the next few months". JHD has filled in a "short on-line application" to join, but has heard nothing.

and has missed key deadlines

JHD gives the BCS talk to freshers in induction week, but had to use the 2008 pack in 2009 as "the 2009 pack is not ready, due to the transformation".

⁴A reply from a Vice-President to one particular gripe.

⁵In the interests of transparency, I should point out that Jeremy is a former student of mine from 1981–2.

The *principle* of the academy, giving the “learned society” element of BCS its distinctive label, certainly seems good. I note that Professors Bacon and Bundy, the BCS Vice-Presidents closely associated with the Academy, have written urging us to support the Trustee Board in the voting for the EGM.

5 How am I going to vote

There is probably more going to be said in the next few days, so what follows is only my impressions today. I also note that it is not necessary to be “consistent” in one’s voting, and one could vote “no” to both 1 and 6, thereby essentially delivering a “not proven” verdict.

1. Difficult.
2. Difficult.
3. I feel strongly tempted to vote in favour of this motion. It should have been the easiest thing for the Trustee Board to provide that information as part of their “explanatory note”. They say⁶ that “There was a request made at the July 2009 Council meeting for some more information, and this was not followed up — this is true, and something for which Council has received an apology”, however I cannot see actual answers to the questions in my Council papers. Having got as far as an EGM, this information surely has to be provided.
4. My current mood is to abstain on this one. It clearly *should* be one of the world’s leading institutions, but largely by dint of being very good in its own country first, and, as I said in section 2, I don’t think it is there yet.
5. I am inclined to vote in favour of this one. Voting for both this and 3 sends a signal that it is the execution, and not the principle, which is necessarily at fault.
6. I am inclined to vote against this one, irrespective of how I vote on 1 and 2. I certainly do not have *complete* confidence in the Trustees and the CEO, and I feel that they should heed the wake-up call that this EGM is, rather than retreat into a defensive bunker as they seem to have done. There *are* notable lapses in communication (see note A in my Council notes), and the fact that members *feel* neglected is itself a black mark against the “management”.
7. I am definitely going to vote against this one. Although the Council is “only” advisory, its advice was not sought on this, which does affect the rights or members, whom Council represents. I can see why, given that some members of Council are requisitioners. Equally, I understand

⁶<https://wam.bcs.org/wam/sentinelcheck.exe?/20799/20801/23366/23367/probity-trust.htm>.

that the Trustee Board was worried that, if they failed in this EGM, the requisitioners would come back again. However, this could have been solved by proposing a similar resolution *but* with a ‘sunset’ clause (e.g. “for the three years following this EGM, Bye-law 29 be amended ...”) and a statement that the TB *would* consult with Council on a permanent amendment. JHD would personally prefer a formula whereby the quota grew as \sqrt{n} or $\log n$, rather than linearly with n , but that is not an option open to us here: we are given a “take it or leave it” choice.

6 If you want to change your vote

I have been told the following by my local branch.

The Electoral Reform Society, the independent body running the voting on behalf of BCS, have therefore provided the following information.

“Should someone wish to alter their vote, they should notify us by emailing onlinevoting@electoralreform.co.uk. We will be able to reset a person’s security codes and they will then be able to login again and resubmit their proxy form. Similarly, we can also re-issue a paper ballot and remove the original from the count.”

A Is BCS a Members’ organisation?

It is frequently stated⁷ that “The first thing to say is that the BCS is NOT a members organisation, and it does not exist to provide services for its members.” Like much else in this murky debate, this is both true and false. The Royal Charter (clause 2) states the objective of BCS as being

to promote the study and practice of Computing and to advance knowledge and education therein for the benefit of the public.

However, clause 3(h) of the Charter allows BCS

to enable and encourage all persons engaged in or interested in Computing to meet and correspond in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information on the science, practice, teaching, application and use of Computing.

It is true that BCS is not *required* to do this, and indeed the requisitioners (and others) feel that this aspect of BCS’s activities have been de-emphasised recently.

⁷Most recently in Prof. MacKinnon’s post to the Professors.