

GENERAL

Lawyers charged with apathy as meeting folds

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356 words

31 October 2007

[The West Australian](#)

METRO

14

English

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WA lawyers have been accused of apathy and the States Law Society described as self-serving after the peak legal body failed to attract enough members to hold its annual meeting.

The Monday night meeting needed a turn-out of 40 lawyers from its 2555-strong membership, but was adjourned when just 34 members attended, short of the quorum.

Society president Maria Saraceni said yesterday it was not the first time the AGM had failed to attract a quorum, but she disputed claims that it reflected apathy among the professional groups members.

"It is a much wider problem," Ms Saraceni said.

"People are time-poor. I think you will find that with any trade union-type organisation, getting people to AGMs is a big problem. Like anything, some people are more proactive than others."

The AGM was to consider changes to the Law Society's constitution and debate its position on the Government's controversial plans for a human rights Act, which have divided opinion in the legal community.

The West Australians request to attend the AGM was denied, which the society said was in accordance with its protocol that the meeting be restricted to members.

High-profile criminal lawyer Tom Percy yesterday described the apathy of WA lawyers as "beyond any doubt", saying the lack of interest was concerning and had allowed the State Government to "ride roughshod" by pushing through controversial legislation such as its tough proceeds of crime confiscation laws.

Experienced commercial lawyer Neil Fearis, who is opposed to a human rights Act because of concerns it will undermine the law by passing too much power to unelected judges, yesterday accused the Law Society of failing to represent the interests of the legal profession.

"They are a completely self-serving waste of time," Mr Fearis said. "I don't believe they are representative of the broad legal fraternity."

Ms Saraceni said a recent survey of lawyers had found support for a role for the society, but also revealed a demand for the professional body to become more innovative and responsive to the changing demands of practice.