



## **BIG STAKES FOR BIG END OF TOWN**

The Daily Telegraph (Australia)

January 2, 2025 Thursday

Telegraph Edition

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**Section:** NEWS; Pg. 12

**Length:** 834 words

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### **Body**

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Business giants Star, **Fortescue**, Coles, Woolworths and the Pratt family all head to court this year facing expensive legal fights Australia's regulators have come out swinging against alleged corporate wrongdoing this year, launching a range of hard-hitting civil and criminal lawsuits against some of the country's biggest companies and individuals.

Here are some of the biggest court cases in business set to play out in 2025.

**FORMER STAR CASINO DIRECTORS FACE TRIAL** Former Star Entertainment directors being sued over allegations they failed to stop money laundering risks and criminal links creeping into its operation are on trial from February 10 for about six weeks.

The Australian Securities and Investments Commission launched the civil case in the Federal Court against ex-CEO Mattias Bekier and ex-chairman John O'Neill among other board members. Chinese high roller junket operator Suncity allegedly pumped billions of dollars into Star Casino, with Star's turnover from Suncity reportedly worth \$2.1bn, \$4bn and \$5.9bn for the 2017, 2018 and 2019 financial years.

ASIC has alleged the board continued to allow the junket operator to expand its operations instead of scrutinising its potential organised crime links and money laundering risks.

In 2022, an inquiry revealed the casino stopped short of issuing Suncity a third warning letter after it was busted exchanging bundles of cash for casino chips, breaching anti-money laundering rules.

Instead, Star allegedly renewed its agreement with the junket operator in 2018. Other board members Kathleen Lahey, Richard Sheppard, Gerard Bradley, Sally Pitkin, Benjamin Heap, Zlatko Todorovski, Paula Martin and Greg Hawkins have been named in the lawsuit. All 11 former executives have denied the allegations.

**ANDREW FORREST V ELEMENT ZERO** Mining giant **Fortescue** managed to keep an explosive lawsuit it lodged against some former senior executives secret for a while.

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But in June, a judgement was published that revealed Andrew Forrest's company obtained court orders to launch raids on the homes and offices of former **Fortescue** chief scientist Bart Kolodziejczyk, long term Forrest lieutenant Michael Masterman and former staff member Bjorn Winther-Jensen.

It was revealed **Fortescue** accused Element Zero of "industrial-scale misuse" of confidential information concerning its green iron technology. Element Zero denied the allegations.

The case continues, after Element Zero failed to appeal a decision that granted the search orders. They will file another appeal to overturn that decision.

**COLES, WOOLWORTHS DEFEND 'FAKE' DISCOUNT ALLEGATIONS** Supermarket giants Coles and Woolworths deny claims they misled consumers by promoting "illusory discounts" on hundreds of common grocery products.

The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission claimed products like tampons and fly spray were sold at regular long term prices, before they were subject to a hike of at least 15 per cent for a brief period and then "discounted" at a price higher than, or the same as, the regular price that applied before the spike.

Both supermarkets have denied the allegations, saying surging supplier prices and other cost increases led it to pump up the value of the goods. The allegations were a tough initiation for Woolies new CEO Amanda Bardwell.

Trial dates have not been set, but could be in the second half of the year.

**PRATT FAMILY FACES TWO COURT FIGHTS** The billionaire Pratt family are now embroiled in two court fights aimed at protecting their wealth.

The latest legal saga was launched by Heloise Pratt after she accused her ex-husband and billionaire investor Alex Waislitz of criminality and acting "dishonestly" by paying himself and his charitable foundation \$1.147m without her knowledge and approval.

Mr Waislitz denies the allegations. The case appears to centre on control of the \$1.3bn stock investment empire run by Mr Waislitz but also owned by Ms Pratt for more than three decades.

In the other matter, late family patriarch Richard Pratt's love child Paula Hitchcock secured a partial win in her bid to claim an equitable slice of the family trust in October.

The matter has dragged on since 2022, and could do again in 2025 after Ms Hitchcock asked the court to update her pleadings again.

**ASIC V CBUS** After ASIC sued the \$92bn super fund Cbus over allegations they delayed insurance payments to vulnerable families in November, the matter could slow down in 2025.

ASIC claimed it took more than a year in some cases for the fund - which is chaired by Labor National President Wayne Swan - to pay out death and disabilities payments.

It prompted the regulator to issue the entire sector with a warning to big super that they will crack down on the \$4 trillion sector over failures to track end-to-end death benefits claims handling times and "weak" -practices.

According to court updates Cbus will not be required to file a defence to the allegations until May 16 after ASIC lodges a full statement of claim. The case is then listed for mediation on June 23.

**Load-Date:** January 1, 2025