

MASTER BUILDERS ACT

Transcript

Summary

Interview with Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT and Ross Solly on ABC Canberra Breakfast, discussing the fallout from Operation Kingfisher, an investigation that uncovered corruption and misconduct regarding procurement within the ACT government. The primary focus is on systemic failures in government procurement and the resignation of Cabinet Minister Yvette Berry.

- Channel: ABC Canberra
- Program: Breakfast with Ross Solly
- Date broadcast: Friday 24 July 2026
- Time broadcast: 7:14am

Transcription

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

[Host describing text received from program listener 'Dave' regarding his experience of procurement processes in the ACT]

And Dave says, unfortunately, the ACT procurement issue is no surprise.

[quote: 4 years ago, in the middle of a tender process, we received from the tender team accidentally an internal document that showed decisions were being made which suppliers they did and didn't want before tenders were submitted. It's a bloody joke, and ever since I've pulled back from responding to most ACT government tenders.] That's from Dave.

Well, I'll tell you somebody else who is not surprised at all and has been warning for some time that this sort of stuff happens is the Master Builders Association.

Anna Neelagama is the CEO and joins us this morning.

Anna, I just read out that text from Dave, and I reckon you're going to tell me that those sort of stories you've heard on more than a few occasions. Good morning to you.

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

Good morning, Ross. Normally I'd say it's great to be with you, but today is a really disappointing day for both Canberrans and local builders.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

Yeah, is Dave right? Is this sort of thing commonplace?

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

Look, I think what we've seen in the findings of Operation Kingfisher is a culture that's encouraging serious corruption and misconduct. It's a significant national finding, and what we've seen in the past 24 hours is really the management of the political fallout of it, with the Cabinet Minister resigning but not leaving the Assembly. What we really need to see is a serious systems overhaul so we can deal with the fundamental fairness issues that builders and all of our members have faced.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

Generally, does the procurement approach, the way that procurement operates here in the ACT, and we know that it's definitely skewed towards local jobs, local businesses, etc. Is there a feeling that it's working, Anna Neelagama, or not?

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

Actually Ross, I'm going to pull you up there because what Kingfisher found and what we've been saying for a long time, whilst there is the framework of a Secure Local Jobs Code, that Code neither requires jobs to be secure nor local, so it does not preference local businesses, it does not preference local workers. One of the main findings of Operation Kingfisher is that the Secure Local Jobs Code, of which you know the corrupt behaviour actually occurred under the guise of, must be improved. But I think there's really a foundation to call for it to go altogether, and at the very least, it absolutely must be independently reviewed.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

Why is it not working? I mean, you hear from your members, you hear from builders. I mean, you were yesterday going on about how this has gone on, dragged on for 5 years or so, this whole investigation, while those caught up in it had to sit there and wait for something to happen. What are you hearing from your members about the whole process? Are they frustrated with it?

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

Absolutely. And you and I spoke about what occurs in procurement in the ACT, many times. Contracts go interstate when there was local capability to deliver it. The Secure Local Jobs Code being nothing but a piece of paper which everyone must comply with in order to win government work, but then we see the work go elsewhere. Kingfisher highlighted some serious issues with the function of the code, and that's on top of the Assembly already recommending that an independent review of the Code was absolutely warranted. This is a really serious issue. We have had a government being found guilty of serious misconduct and corruption, and a Deputy Chief Minister has had to resign. It doesn't get more serious than this.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

This is about Campbell. Do you think that there are other projects out there? Fiona Carrick was with me earlier on this morning. She's been raising concerns for a long time about Phillip Pool, about what happened around that. Do you think there are other projects out there that should also now be investigated, that they should maybe go back and have a look at the whole process for how it all came about, what decisions were made, who made the decisions, etc. etc.?

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

Absolutely, and Kingfisher identifies that an audit is very much required. But it can't take 5 years. We've got to act quickly and we've got to be responsive and we've got to fix procurement because at the end of the day, Ross, that's not government's money, that's your money, that's your listeners' money. It is money contributed by households and taxpayers and it shouldn't be misspent.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

I don't want you to tell me which projects, but are there projects out there which you are—I mean, you know, talk of the town, you know what people are saying. Are there projects out there that you're suspicious about?

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

Look, I think what Kingfisher identified is a culture and a system that enabled significant misconduct, interference, intervention by the top officials that we should have trust and faith in, in one project for a school. That means anything in the portfolio could be subject to the same interference and maliciousness.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

It's going to be interesting to see who now takes over the portfolio. Do you think that Yvette Berry should still be in the Assembly?

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

I think that's ultimately a question for her constituents and the electorate, but I think suffice to say, listening to what your listeners are rightly texting, people have lost all public confidence.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

In her or in the government, are you saying?

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

I think they've lost confidence in the procurement system and they should rightly feel that way.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

Anna Neelagama, I really appreciate your time this morning. Thank you.

Anna Neelagama, CEO, Master Builders ACT:

Thank you, Ross, and thank you to the media for holding some truth to power in this very, very important report.

Ross Solly, ABC Canberra:

Well, we do our best, Anna. Sometimes we get criticised for it, but we try to do our best. Thank you very much, Anna Neelagama, the CEO of Master Builders ACT.

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