MASTER BUILDERS
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

MASTER BUILDERS ACT

Transcript

Summary

Ross Solly interview with Master Builders ACT CEO Anna Neelagama discussing ACT Government response to Operation Kingfisher, calls for independent procurement oversight, and lack of confidence in ACT tender processes.

- Channel: ABC Canberra
- Program: Canberra Breakfast
- Date broadcast: 23 October 2026
- Time broadcast: 7:15 AM - 7:21 AM

Transcription

ROSS SOLLY: Because, revisiting this week, the whole Operation Kingfisher debacle and what's happened to the people who have been named in that has also prompted the Master Builders Association in the ACT to revisit the issue. And they say that the government and its response to the Kingfisher report doesn't pass the public sniff test. Anna Neelagama is the CEO of Master Builders ACT and joins us this morning. Anna Neelagama, good morning to you.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Good morning, Ross. Thanks for having us on.

ROSS SOLLY: No, you are welcome. Why do you think the government hasn't, that their response hasn't passed the sniff test?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Look, the ACT Government quietly published their response to this Integrity Commission matter. They're obliged to do that because someone within their ranks has been found guilty of serious misconduct and corruption. And really ...

ROSS SOLLY: Yeah, yeah, I need to just clarify. They haven't been found guilty of it, but they've been found to have - I know it's just terminology, but they've been found to have committed or acted corruptly.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Individuals within …

ROSS SOLLY: Correct? Yeah, yeah.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Apologies. I thought I'd made that clear. And they released an 11-page report that's kind of filled with a series of internal reviews and internal advisories that falls short of the generational change you would expect and the generational change and reform you'd expect of a serious misconduct and corruption matter.

ROSS SOLLY: What would you rather have seen? What other initiatives should they have put in place?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: We've put out a series of recommendations in three key areas. One is justice. A lot of people spent a lot of time on Operation Kingfisher. The builder involved and the entire team that participated in the Campbell Primary School bid has not received an apology from the ACT Government. The other things that haven't occurred, right now, if you're participating in a tender process, there's still no independent and immediate pathway where you can report questionable practices. And the third is, they commissioned kind of an audit where they're going to have a look over the past few years and look at procurement decisions and see if anything like Kingfisher has been replicated. It's really important that a process like that is completely independent, done at arm's length, does not take seven years and is not marked by the very people that make the procurement decisions.

ROSS SOLLY: Marking their own homework. Just on that, and this did come up this week in the Legislative Assembly. A couple of things, Anna Neelagama, I'd be interested to get your response to this. The government was asked this week whether they would apologise to Manteena. So, this was the company that appears to have been dudded by the whole process. And if my memory serves me correct, the answer provided by the Chief Minister was that they would seek legal advice on that before they made a decision whether they would apologise to Manteena. So, this is what, how many months on, and we're still waiting to find out whether there should be an apology or not. The other issue is they pushed back, the Government

pushed back on this claim that they're marking their own homework. They're argument is, well, you've got things like the Integrity Commission, you've got the Corruption Commission, you've got all these different avenues that are there, that can hold the Government to account on issues like this and can, if they choose to do so, conduct their own investigations. Is that good enough?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: I mean, if you look at Operation Kingfisher, it took nearly seven years, end to end, and the facts of that particular matter were very clear, and they were well tabled. And we can't spend seven years on every single procurement decision that's made, being made, ever since 2018. You need a dedicated rapid task force and a Procurement Commissioner that has the skills to work through that quickly.

ROSS SOLLY. So, there should be someone just designated, as you mentioned, as you call it, a Procurement Commissioner, Anna Neelagama …

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Absolutely, an independent, arm's length, and given the resources to do this and not to take another 10 years.

ROSS SOLLY: And when you and I have spoken a couple of times since Kingfisher was released, we've been talking about whether the whole procurement process in the ACT is fit for purpose and whether, because the CFMEU were front and centre at the heart of all of this, have things changed in that regard? What's the word on the street, Anna Neelagama, have things changed, do you feel, and are builders feeling more confident now, when they take part in procurement processes here in the ACT? Are they feeling more confident that they're going to get a fair hearing and that the cards aren't stacked against them?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Look, I think it's important to note, Ross, is that the union weren't found guilty of misconduct. They were just government individuals …

ROSS SOLLY: No, they were not. I mean, they were just doing what any union should be doing.

ANNA NEELAGAMA. So, I think that's an important note. I think our whole response, we've said, fundamentally, there's been a failure to restore confidence in the system, and unless certain things change and there's generational reform, it's going to be very hard to have that confidence.

ROSS SOLLY. So, builders still feel....

ANNA NEELAGAMA: When it comes to arm's length decision making, we've suggested that on major projects, there needs to be an independent probity official appointed to oversee that project, that all political advisors and procurement officials undertake fit and proper person testing, and that a union contact register is established in relation to procurement, where contact is made, and it is not in relation to the organisation of the workforce. So, there are plenty of things you can do to say, hey, Canberra community, we're spending your money well, we're making these decisions well, and we're being very transparent about how we're delivering all of that.

ROSS SOLLY: Very interesting food for thought there. Anna Neelagama, appreciate your time, as always. Thank you.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Thank you, Ross, and thanks for asking the right questions.

END

Media enquiries:

Tara Nichols | Communications & Marketing Manager
tnichols@mba.org.au | 0430 026 612