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MASTER BUILDERS ACT

Transcript

Summary

Georgia Stynes interview with Master Builders ACT CEO Anna Neelagama, discussing the new inquiry arising as a result of Operation Kingfisher findings, and the Master Builders ACT Women in Construction program.

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Transcription

GEORGIA STYNES: So, earlier this week, we learnt that a Legislative Assembly committee is going to undertake an inquiry into the operation of the Territory's integrity framework. This is after serious corruption findings were made against two Territory government officials earlier this year. Now, Operation Kingfisher found that two senior public servants prioritised the interests of the CFMEU in relation to a contract for the refurbishment of Campbell Primary School. The Assembly committee will now examine the ACT Government's response to the Kingfisher report and identify any opportunities to strengthen the Integrity Framework. Now, Master Builders ACT Chief Executive Officer Anna Neelagama joins me. Good afternoon.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Good afternoon. Thank you for having me.

GEORGIA STYNES: I imagine you welcome this.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Absolutely. We've consistently called for an independent inquiry in the wake of Operation Kingfisher, and we're just pleased to see that the Standing Committee is taking this seriously.

GEORGIA STYNES: What do you want the terms of reference, or what are you hoping they look at?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: I mean, I think the message from us is, everything is not fixed, and the ACT Government saying 'everything is fixed', is not good enough. And we really want the inquiry to look beyond the series of internal reviews that the government has put in place, to give Canberrans the assurance that they rightly deserve that public money is being spent well.

GEORGIA STYNES: What's the issue with internal reviews? Or do you welcome those as well, but you want an outside lens?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: I think it's critically important that we consult with industry on past procurement decisions, that we consult with the community and that we have a degree of independence when you are reviewing past decisions. I know in our own business, I'm not the best person to mark my own homework. That's pretty standard. And for something as significant as this, obviously we should be bringing in third-party experts with independence who can look at things objectively and report back to the community.

GEORGIA STYNES: Who would you like to make sure is involved in terms of people who are consulted as part of this?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: I think anyone with a stake in procurement, anyone that's been involved in past procurement decisions, and anyone with an interest in how ACT money is spent.

GEORGIA STYNES: If you look at procurement processes here in the ACT, just generally speaking, are they worse or not as tight, would you say, than elsewhere? Or is this a problem, you think nationally?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: I couldn't speak for nationally. All I know is the lived experience that Master Builders deal with day in, day out. And a genuine investigation into historical procurement that goes beyond internal reviews is certainly very much warranted, as well as a review of the procurement systems. But there's a range of other things that the inquiry should seek to look at, including the appointment of an independent procurement commissioner. Because if there are problems with live tenders right now, there needs to be an avenue for members of the public service and members of the industry to report that straight away. We can't have another seven-year process like the Integrity Commission. And finally, I think it's really important that the ACT Government apologises to the affected builder from Operation Kingfisher.

GEORGIA STYNES: You made a comment before that the problem's not fixed. Is it your view still that there are other projects or other issues?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: We're only quoting the Integrity Commission findings, which express strongly that it would be naive to think that this is a one-off.

GEORGIA STYNES: Are you confident though that an inquiry like this will, I guess, fix the problem as you see it? Because of course the inquiry can be made, there can be findings, but the government doesn't necessarily have to accept them.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Look, I've been reflecting on that, and it's a good question, but I think we've got to get as many eyes as possible on these systems because ultimately, again, it's how taxpayers' money is spent and we can't, every time there's a problem within procurement, spend six years on an Integrity Commission investigation. We need something that's more rapid response, procurement-specific, that really examines the issues independently.

GEORGIA STYNES: Just on another issue or topic, Master Builders ACT is hosting a Women in Construction end-of-year party fiesta this evening.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Yes, some good news!

GEORGIA STYNES: I know that there's been a real push for many different reasons to get more women into construction. Where is that at? Has it been successful?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Look, we're still, in the ACT, only around three per cent of women on the tools and around 15 per cent of the whole workforce when you look at sort of office jobs and allied jobs like interior design. So, we can do better, and part of Master Builders' job is to make building and construction an appealing place for young women to work and mid-career women to work, and also for their families to feel confident that it's a welcoming place.

So, our Women in Construction program has hundreds of members. We're welcoming around 100 women in construction here tonight, and we really try and do a range of things. We like to connect, develop, and profile. So, profile: we like to get the stories of women in construction out there because you can't be what you can't see. We like to develop. So, throughout the year, for young female apprentices, we host a range of workshops. We host workshops for professional women in construction, and then we also host workshops for female business owners, because all of those different groups have different requirements. And then, like tonight, we love to network and connect our women in construction. And you should see it. The workshop is covered in Mexican decorations. It's a real fiesta. They're cooking tacos, there's margaritas, it's quite something.

GEORGIA STYNES: Sounds lovely. It's making me hungry too.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Sorry, pop by!

GEORGIA STYNES: That's alright. The other thing I just want to ask you quickly, is it about getting women into construction or is it keeping them there? Because I wonder, I had heard that we were getting more female apprentices, and still needing more apprentices across the board, but whether or not women stay is another thing.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Yeah, look, attraction and retention for young men and young women is difficult because often we see them going on a career path outside of the industry or poached into management roles straight off the trades. So, in that instance, we're our own worst enemy. But I think in our apprentice program, we work incredibly hard to give the young women the support they need. We put them in touch with alumni, so if they have questions about what they're seeing on site or they've got a work problem, they've got the networks, and they can actually reach out to their peers, and I guess problem-solve with a degree of discretion and confidence. So, putting things in place like that is really, really important to keep people in the industry.

GEORGIA STYNES: Thanks so much for your time. I hope tonight goes well.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Thank you so much.

GEORGIA STYNES: Thank you. That's Anna Neelagama. She is the CEO of Master Builders ACT.

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