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Transcript

Summary

Leon Delaney interview with Master Builders ACT's Anna Neelagama discussing Operation Kingfisher and the issues that the report discovered in the procurement process.

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Transcription

LEON DELANEY: That a Legislative Assembly Committee will be conducting further inquiries into matters arising from the Operation Kingfisher report. You will recall, of course, Operation Kingfisher was the investigation by the ACT Integrity Commissioner into the procurement processes surrounding the Campbell Primary School redevelopment. It raised multiple issues and didn't necessarily answer all of the questions that people have. CEO at Master Builders ACT Anna Neelagama, good afternoon.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Good afternoon. Thanks for having me.

LEON DELANEY: Well, thanks for joining us today. Obviously, Operation Kingfisher was looking at one specific issue, but it does raise the question of has this issue also occurred in other procurement processes. And that's the question we haven't really seen a satisfactory answer for as yet, isn't it?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Absolutely. The idea that 'everything is fixed' is just not good enough. And we can't expect Canberrans to just move along, and government doing internal audits, consulting internally, looking at decisions made from 2019 to 2024 doesn't provide independent assurance and third-party oversight. The Integrity Commission's own report and findings made it clear it would be naive to assume that the circumstances of Operation Kingfisher were a once-off.

LEON DELANEY: That's the most chilling finding of all, really, that it would be naive to assume it hadn't happened elsewhere. And yet there doesn't seem to have been any great enthusiasm by the ACT Government to follow up on that, does there?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Indeed, and I think that's disappointing because taxpayers' money, the community's money, is at stake. The public absolutely deserves confidence in how every dollar of procurement is decided.

LEON DELANEY: Now, the new inquiry, the fresh inquiry, will be conducted by the Standing Committee on the Integrity Commission and statutory office holders. That committee is chaired by Elizabeth Lee of the Liberals. But of course, committees are separate from the political process, aren't they?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Yes. We've called for an independent inquiry, and we're pleased that the Standing Committee is taking this seriously. This is the kind of independent review and examination needed, not another internal government review with more marking of their own homework. We're looking forward to making a submission ourselves.

LEON DELANEY: Well, I'm sure you are. It remains to be seen exactly how far this inquiry will go, of course. What precisely would you like to see it address?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Look, a few key things. One, a real investigation into historical procurement decisions that goes deeper than simply another internal review. We'd really like to see an apology from the ACT Government to the affected local builder that deserved to win the tender in Operation Kingfisher and did not. We want to see a review of procurement. We want an independent Procurement Commissioner appointed because we know there are ongoing problems with the procurement system. And members of the public service or the industry need to be able to report complaints in real time and not wait almost seven years for an outcome, as was the case with the Integrity Commission. And really, more probity controls on major projects and dedicated probity advisers working on them. They're just our ideas for minimum first steps

to get the generational reform that we need. That restores fairness, yes, but also ensures and assures the community that your money is being well spent.

LEON DELANEY: Indeed. You've remarked upon the need for the ACT Government to rebuild trust in the procurement processes, and that's an important thing for the community, isn't it?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Absolutely. We need to have the utmost faith that it's fair, it's competitive and, you know, the best tender wins every time.

LEON DELANEY: And delivers value for money for the ACT taxpayer. The other element that is associated with this issue, but wasn't necessarily directly addressed in the Kingfisher report, was the Secure Local Jobs Code, which remains quite controversial and contentious. And I know we've spoken about that before, but it's one of those Orwellian titles where it's really got nothing to do with local jobs and making them secure, has it?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Absolutely. It does not ensure that jobs within ACT Government procurement are secure or local. And we've seen a few incidents recently that have really, really highlighted that. It's time to review that. It's time to get rid of it. And it's just a step in the procurement process that makes no sense. It's more red tape, it's more regulation. It favours out-of-towners over Canberran locals. And in the instance of Operation Kingfisher, it was misused and confused in order to skew procurement outcomes, which has led to a serious finding of misconduct and corruption.

LEON DELANEY: Indeed. And of course those findings related to some particular individuals who are no longer in their previous positions. But there's more to be discovered by scratching further below the surface, isn't there?

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Absolutely. And that's why this inquiry is important. And again, we simply implore those in the position where they can make decisions to use Operation Kingfisher as an opportunity to put in place generational reform.

LEON DELANEY: Indeed. Anna, thanks very much for your time today.

ANNA NEELAGAMA: Thank you for having me.

LEON DELANEY: Thank you. Anna Neelagama, the CEO of Master Builders ACT.

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