



## Radio Transcript

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**TITLE: ROSS SOLLY INTERVIEW WITH THE ANU'S KATE WITENDEN.**

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**Summary: Ross Solly interview with the ANU's Kate Witenden discussing staff morale at the ANU, Renew ANU and policies on workplace bullying.**

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## TRANSCRIPTION

**ROSS SOLLY:** So if you were listening to the Drive Show yesterday with AD Francis, the ANU Vice-Chancellor, Genevieve Bell was on there announcing, amongst other things, that there will be no more forced redundancies at the ANU. Cost-cutting will continue, but they'll take a different approach in terms of the number of personnel at the ANU.

You heard potentially David Pocock earlier on in the show this morning, the Independent Senator, who is still not satisfied; he believes that there are still too many issues that need to be dealt with at the ANU, he still believes that the leadership team there is not appropriate and that they need to step aside, and he's also concerned about morale at the ANU, in fact he said that he thinks, and he's heard, and we've had some texters also saying this, that it's the worst it's ever been.

Well, Kate Witenden is the Chief People Officer at the ANU, and she's popped in to the studio this morning to join me. Kate Witenden, good morning to you.

**KATE WITENDEN:** Good morning, Ross.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Thanks for coming in. Can you, first of all explain what is the role of the Chief People Officer?

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yep. My role at the Australian National University, Ross, is to look after the staff at the ANU, so that includes all of our academic staff and our professional staff.

**ROSS SOLLY:** When you say "look after", look after their wellbeing, look after their mental health, look after --

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah, yeah, it's literally the whole life cycle of the employee experience, Ross, so that's right, from recruitment right through to health and wellbeing, through to professional development, through to offboarding.

**ROSS SOLLY:** So do you have like a management role in the transition process that's happening at the moment?

**KATE WITENDEN:** I do, I do. I am part of the management of Renew ANU.

**ROSS SOLLY:** If people are saying that morale at the ANU at the moment is at rock bottom, the worst it's ever been, that's obviously got to be a concern for you.

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah, it is a concern, Ross, for all of us at the ANU. We're actively listening to our staff all the time through the Renew ANU process, and last week we were obviously at the Senate Inquiry, and Senator Faruqi asked around, you know, our own staff feedback, and how everyone's feeling, and what we're trying to do at the moment is just get our listening voice back on in terms of our overall engagement survey and have that come out, 'cause --

**ROSS SOLLY:** Yeah. So you're conceding that it has been a little bit mishandled then, the whole process?

**KATE WITENDEN:** No, no, it's not what I'm saying at all. What I'm saying is --

**ROSS SOLLY:** But you said to now get your listening ears on to get the listening process going.

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Is that a suggestion that maybe you weren't listening before?

**KATE WITENDEN:** No, it's not. We have a formal staff engagement process at the ANU, right, so that's done through a partner organisation Culture Amp, so we are a data-informed organisation, so we take our engagement through those surveys.

Through the Renew ANU program, we've actively been receiving feedback and listening to our staff through that process, right; we've had extensive feedback and consultation through that process. So we are listening. This is just another way that we gather information or data around how our staff are feeling.

**ROSS SOLLY:** So are you saying that the process hasn't been mismanaged then?

**KATE WITENDEN:** I'm saying that the process has actually been well-managed. We manage our process through our enterprise agreement, so our change processes are largely informed by that.

So in the context of the environment that we're in, we have to be very careful about the way that we engage through change, and we do follow our process through our enterprise agreement.

**ROSS SOLLY:** If it has been well-managed, morale wouldn't be at rock bottom, would it? You are the Chief People Officer, the whole idea is to keep people buoyed and to keep the morale up. If they're saying morale is at rock bottom, that would seem to suggest - how could the process be well-managed? That's not the outcome you want.

**KATE WITENDEN:** It's certainly not the outcome that we want, but the reality is, Ross, change is difficult, so any institutional organisation going through change is going to encounter morale issues.

So there is no change process that I've managed in my career where there has not been an impact on morale. Going through change and having that heaviness of change over the institution is absolutely going to impact morale.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Yeah, for sure. I mean we've been through it here at the ABC, change here, and it was a very difficult process, but then in hindsight, management said that maybe there should have been more communication and better communication. Change is difficult, but managing change is what people get paid a lot of money to do to make sure that it is as smooth as possible.

For people looking on from the outside and from people within the system that we've spoken to, they're certainly not feeling that it's been a smooth process, and in fact they're feeling that they've been ignored and that they've basically been - basically shut down whenever they've wanted to protest or raise any concerns about it.

**KATE WITENDEN:** So certainly, staff, we have had lots of voices from our community, Ross, you know, raising concerns, actively providing feedback through the process, and the management and leadership team have certainly listened and have actioned a lot of that feedback through the process.

So I do hear what you're saying. I'm very sympathetic to our community at the moment. It's a really hard time for everyone; it's hard for our academic cohort, it's also very difficult for our professional cohort, and I think what probably concerns me when I hear, you know, some of those remarks a little bit out of context is, you know, behind the Renew ANU process there's a whole cohort of professional staff and academic staff that are working to support the change, and that's a huge load and burden.

So for example, you know, my area, the people and culture team, the finance team, our student and staff services or wellbeing and safety teams are under immense pressure at the moment trying to respond as positively and as quickly as we can to those concerns.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Yeah. Independent Senator, David Pocock, has been one of your biggest critics. I had him on the show earlier this morning. Let's just have a listen to a little bit of what he had to say.

[Excerpt]

**DAVID POCOCK:** My concern after the last three years in politics is that often when the major parties want to kick something down the road, you either have another inquiry or an investigation, and you know, who knows whether or not that ever gets made public, and it kind of just buys time.

I think things are pretty urgent. I'm talking to staff who are saying that there are a huge number of people on sick leave, just simply not turning up when they don't have to, you know, the staff meeting areas are empty, morale is at an all-time low, and you know, that's - yeah, it's so disappointing to see how low things have got at the university.

[End of Excerpt]

**ROSS SOLLY:** Is he right, Kate Witenden; are there a lot of people who are taking sick leave; are there a lot of people who are no longer turning up for work?

**KATE WITENDEN:** I'm certainly not aware of people not turning up for work, Ross. We've had a particularly hard health season over this winter, so I know I've actually had a lot of staff within my team and certainly close cohorts, we have had a lot of flu, we've had a lot of COVID --

**ROSS SOLLY:** So there aren't people taking sick leave because of the stress of what's happening at the ANU?

**KATE WITENDEN:** So I don't have that level of detail and visibility in terms of when people put in for personal leave, it's not tagged that way. My --

**ROSS SOLLY:** But if there was concern, I mean surely that would be something that would have to come across your radar, wouldn't it, if there are a lot of people --

**KATE WITENDEN:** It would be raised to me, that's right, it would be raised to me.

**ROSS SOLLY:** And nobody's raised that with you?

**KATE WITENDEN:** At this stage I don't have that data, Ross. So my team, I have a health and wellbeing team that looks after our staff, particularly when you start talking about workplace stress. So we have policies, we have processes, very human processes on how we manage that, but we certainly don't, you know, openly, you know, talk about individual matters that might be going on.

**ROSS SOLLY:** No, no, absolutely not. But are you surprised then to hear David Pocock say that he's heard that there are a lot of people who are taking sick leave because of the stress?

**KATE WITENDEN:** I am.

**ROSS SOLLY:** You're surprised, yeah.

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah, I am surprised to hear that, yeah.

**ROSS SOLLY:** What is your role as the Chief People Officer when allegations of bullying are made?

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yep. So when - and exactly your first point, allegations, Ross. So again we have grievance procedures internally about how we deal with those matters, and when we've gone through various fact finding, then that's when we move into more of an investigation phase. But we do have very strict policies and processes around that.

**ROSS SOLLY:** If the allegations were made against a person in power, would it be normal for that person to step aside while the allegations are investigated?

**KATE WITENDEN:** So I guess to answer that, everyone has a right to procedural fairness, Ross.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Of course, yeah.

**KATE WITENDEN:** So there is a process that needs to be undertaken. I think just jumping to a conclusion that everyone should be stepped aside is actually not allowing that procedural fairness to occur.

**ROSS SOLLY:** What about the procedural fairness though for the person who's raised the allegation? If that person is still there and still in a position of seniority, that makes it difficult for them. Is it sometimes in - I don't know what happens in most workplaces, but if an allegation of bullying has been made, would it be normal practice that somebody who's been accused of that would have to just step aside just while the investigation was undertaken?

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah. So it just depends on the facts, Ross. So sometimes that does occur in our process, but that's a risk assessment, and that's based on the facts at the time. So it can happen, that that does happen, but it's based on the circumstances at the time.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Have you been asked, as the Chief People Officer, whether you believe that Julie Bishop - 'cause this is who the allegation has been made about --

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yes.

**ROSS SOLLY:** -- whether she should stay on in that role? Have you been asked about that at all?

**KATE WITENDEN:** I have not been asked about that, Ross, and that's actually a matter for counsel, so that role doesn't actually intersect in that way with counsel. That's a matter for counsel.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Obviously Liz Allen last week, it was very, very heartfelt. As the Chief People Officer, have you reached out to Liz Allen since then?

**KATE WITENDEN:** I've actually reached out to Liz very early on, so quite some time ago, Ross, I was in contact with Liz and actually provided some support to her very early on.

**ROSS SOLLY:** And since last week, have you reached out to her again?

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah. At this point in time, given what's out in the public domain it's actually not appropriate for my role to do that. My health and wellbeing team has actually reached out.

**ROSS SOLLY:** She's part of your staff at the ANU.

**KATE WITENDEN:** She is, but we have protocols in place, Ross, so there's teams, more appropriate teams, my health and wellbeing team are best placed to deal with that.

**ROSS SOLLY:** And have they reached out to her?

**KATE WITENDEN:** They have reached out to her, Ross.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Okay. Yeah, they have. One other quick question. The ANU apparently has released or issued a series of cease and desist orders. Is that appropriate, and who's been getting these cease and desist orders?

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah. I'm actually not across these details, Ross.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Do you know of them; have you heard about this?

**KATE WITENDEN:** No, no, I haven't, no.

**ROSS SOLLY:** Would it surprise you, 'cause it seems heavy handed to be handing out cease and desist orders.

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah. I'm not sure what it's in relation to, like what the actual matters are about, so I can't comment 'cause I'm actually just not aware of the details, Ross.

**ROSS SOLLY:** All right. We've had a couple who have raised with us that apparently some students have received them. But yes, I can I understand if you haven't --

**KATE WITENDEN:** I'm not across those details.

**ROSS SOLLY:** No problem. Kate Witenden, we need to leave it there. We are approaching news. Thank you so much for coming in. I know you do have a very, very difficult job, and it's been a rough time, so I appreciate you coming in and chatting with us this morning.

**KATE WITENDEN:** Yeah. Thanks Ross.

**ROSS SOLLY:** That's the ANU's Chief People Officer, Kate Witenden on ABC.

**END**