



Radio Transcript

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TITLE: ROSS SOLLY INTERVIEW WITH ANU'S REBEKAH BROWN.

Summary: Ross Solly interview with ANU's Rebekah Brown discussing reforms at ANU, and Workplace grievance against the ANU chancellor.

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TRANSCRIPTION

ROSS SOLLY: And Professor Rebekah Brown is here in the studio with me this morning. Professor Brown, good morning to you.

REBEKAH BROWN: Good morning, Ross.

ROSS SOLLY: How are you?

REBEKAH BROWN: I'm well, thank you.

ROSS SOLLY: Are you having fun, yet? That's the question I was going to ask you straight up.

REBEKAH BROWN: That's my aim – to have fun. I'll get there.

ROSS SOLLY: Well, what is it like at the moment? I mean, you've been in the job now for –

REBEKAH BROWN: Eighteen days.

ROSS SOLLY: Eighteen days.

REBEKAH BROWN: This morning is the start of my 18th day.

ROSS SOLLY: Okay. Good to see you're counting. Have you noticed the change? Do you feel there's a change? Because you came into the job and obviously there was a lot of angst at the university. There were a lot of people who were feeling very upset about the direction it was going in. You straight away came in and put a rule through forced redundancies et cetera. Has the moved change, do you feel?

REBEKAH BROWN: I would say that there has been a shift. I would say that there has been a shift in mood, but I wouldn't say that there's been a total change at the university. We still have a lot of people at the university very concerned about the direction of ANU, concerned for their colleagues, concerned around our budget. I would say that I think the door is open for my leadership, but I'd say the jury is out for the community. Our community are waiting to see where I'm going to take the university and how I'm going to respond to the challenges in front of me with the leadership team over my interim period.

ROSS SOLLY: Okay. And so what sort of time frame have you set yourself to actually start making some positive steps? I mean, I'm sure you'll tell me you've already started, but have you set yourself a goal for when you think that people will be able to say, "Hey, we love being at the ANU now. This is the university that we remember"?

REBEKAH BROWN: Yeah, so, well, I have – for myself I've got a number of goals. My first sort of major goal is by the end of the year I will have finished a series of stocktakes around our finances, around our culture and our morale, around or academic performance and productivity and around our internal governance and work that we do on our own representation, our external relationships. And I'm going to be making all those findings available to our community.

ROSS SOLLY: By the end of this calendar year or financial year?

REBEKAH BROWN: The end of this calendar year.

ROSS SOLLY: Okay. Wow. You do know it's sort of 9th of October?

REBEKAH BROWN: I do. I do.

ROSS SOLLY: Okay.

REBEKAH BROWN: And the university leadership group that I've been working with – and we had a big workshop a couple of weeks ago that went for 3 hours – we came collectively to consensus that this was a really important activity for our university, and so a lot of the work I've set up and it's in place. It's happening.

ROSS SOLLY: At the moment so this week we've had announced the Vivienne Thom investigation into bullying. We know that Comcare is also monitoring activities at the ANU. You've got the Lynelle Briggs review that's underway. You're very heavily scrutinised at the moment. Are you comfortable with this?

REBEKAH BROWN: I don't think any of that makes me feel comfortable or anyone at the ANU comfortable. It's probably unprecedented for a university to have so many independent assessments and reviews at any one time from multiple directions.

ROSS SOLLY: Justified, though?

REBEKAH BROWN: What I would say is that it's obviously very important work. I have made myself available to all of these processes. I've been openly engaging in, I've encouraged my whole senior leadership team to do that. And so far I think that it's going well.

ROSS SOLLY: So you think all three investigations are justified?

REBEKAH BROWN: I think that they're necessary. Justification is pretty subjective. I would say that they're necessary investigations. And they're external investigations and external bodies have identified these as really important at this time for ANU. And I'm making sure that we're very compliant and providing the information and responding in very timely and transparent ways with these processes. And really, these processes ultimately are going to lead to stronger, better, higher-performing, happier organisation, and that's what I want. And that's what everyone at ANU wants.

ROSS SOLLY: Yeah.

REBEKAH BROWN: We all want the same thing.

ROSS SOLLY: Not just ANU – I think everybody in Canberra wants the ANU to be back up where it once was.

REBEKAH BROWN: Yeah.

ROSS SOLLY: The Vivienne Thom investigation, so that was – she was appointed by one of your – the council at the ANU. Correct me if I'm wrong, she will only be looking at the bullying allegations raised against Julie Bishop, is that correct? That's the sole area of her investigation?

REBEKAH BROWN: That's not correct, Ross.

ROSS SOLLY: Okay.

REBEKAH BROWN: She will be looking at all the allegations that were raised on the 12th of August at the Senate hearing, Senate estimates hearing. So her remit is to investigate those full suite of allegations, which include those allegations. So she's got a very broad – a broad but a specific remit.

ROSS SOLLY: Will that include investigating the allegations that were initially raised that somebody there was leaking confidential information? Will that be part of her investigation?

REBEKAH BROWN: Will, that will be up to Vivienne Thom, how she unfolds and what she follows for her investigation. The committee –

ROSS SOLLY: That was at the nub – I mean, that's where it all kicked off, wasn't it? Because – again, correct me if I'm wrong – there was an allegation made that somebody was leaking confidential information and then it spiralled from there and then that's when allegation of bullying were made. So is it likely, then, that to get to the bottom of this, part of that investigation will have to be was somebody leaking information from that – those meetings?

REBEKAH BROWN: I mean, the reality is that will be a question for Vivienne Thom as to how she takes that, her analysis and her investigation. But if you're asking me as someone that's not going to be involved in that, I would say that it's likely. But I don't know. That really is a question for Vivienne Thom.

ROSS SOLLY: Okay. Just put your headphones on for a sec, if you would, Professor. When Julie Bishop was on the show with me a couple of weeks ago, we were talking about these bullying allegations, and this is what she had to say.

[Excerpt]

JULIE BISHOP: I went back to ANU after this testimony had been aired in public and I asked if there was a workplace grievance. Why have I not been notified if it's against me, and I was informed that when the grievance was lodged back in March it was so lacking in specificity and details and particulars and evidence and witnesses that it didn't reach the threshold to trigger the notification of a respondent. To this day, I have not been notified that I am the subject of a workplace grievance. But, in any event, having the evidence taken that way, the testimony taken in that way, has completely compromised the workplace grievance process that I understand is underway at ANU.

[End excerpt]

ROSS SOLLY: So that was Julie Bishop telling us that at that time no workplace grievance had been lodged with her. Has that changed? Are you aware? Has a workplace grievance now been lodged and has Julie Bishop now been formally informed of this?

REBEKAH BROWN: I don't believe so, Ross. So obviously the chancellor is aware now that there has been a workplace grievance been lodged within the university and there has been a process. I actually myself had no visibility of this in my former role as the provost. And I do believe the chancellor, when she says she was not notified and had no awareness of that. But, of course, we're all aware of that now. We're all aware of that now.

ROSS SOLLY: Is it important that there is some sort of – and should there be a formal process where it actually is delivered to her and she's told this is what's happening?

REBEKAH BROWN: Absolutely. And there is a stage in any grievance investigation just in the main, in general, where information is investigated, people are spoken about, spoken to and a matter is explored. And then at some point in that process the investigator makes a recommendation to the institution that the individuals that the grievance is against needs to be informed. And as I understand it, the process for that complaint had not reached that stage. But I would say I had no visibility of that. So that's my understanding.

ROSS SOLLY: Has the system broken down somewhere, or is it just this is the way it's meant to be?

REBEKAH BROWN: The system hasn't broken down. But, Ross, we asked Professor Nixon to do a review last year of the former College of Health and Medicine, and one of her findings was our internal complaints handle process was insufficient and needed to improve. And so we are doing that right now. So that is on the record. We know that. We know that our internal complaints handling processes are – need work and need to be improved.

ROSS SOLLY: And this would be an example of where it's fallen short?

REBEKAH BROWN: That's correct. That's what I'm assuming, yes.

ROSS SOLLY: Okay. Just on the text line, Jay says, "Regarding the ANU, young people are making their uni choices now. What is being done to look after the students?" And I guess the follow-on question from that, Professor, is, what would you say to students who are at the moment making big decisions about where they will go to do their studies? What would you say to them if they're thinking about going to the ANU? I mean, why would they line up now to go to the ANU?

REBEKAH BROWN: So to start off with, Ross, I would not shy away from what has been in the newspapers and the reputational damage that ANU has sustained. But at the same time I would be telling our students ANU is a really strong community. ANU, we care about our students. We are the university in this country that has invested for a long time on student accommodation on campus. We have been so committed since we've been incepted, since our inception, to being human scale and really providing that support and the best education to our students. And our staff are so proud of that. And, actually, I would invite any prospective student and their family to come to campus. When you walk around campus and you talk to our students, they're living on campus, they're making their friends on campus, they're having opportunities to engage with all their lecturers, the staff on campus. We have visitors come regularly to the ANU and we always commit to providing opportunities for our students. So I would appeal to our students that the experience that they would have is superior and meaningful. And that's really valuable.

ROSS SOLLY: All right. One other quick issue: later on this morning The Times International University ratings come out. I think last year we were – the ANU was rated equal 73rd et cetera. What would be a good result, do you think, today? You probably already know where you're going to be ranked, but what would be a good result, and where do you think the ANU belongs, and what's your goal in terms of getting the ANU ranked?

REBEKAH BROWN: Okay, so there's a few questions there Ross. What I would say is a good result for us at the moment is no drop in ranking. We don't want to drop on The Times Higher Education Ranking from 73.

ROSS SOLLY: Which is not very –

REBEKAH BROWN: It's not where you need to be.

ROSS SOLLY: No. Where do you need to be?

REBEKAH BROWN: We need to be a top 50 in The Times Higher Education Ranking Scheme.

ROSS SOLLY: And when are you going to be back in the top 50?

REBEKAH BROWN: Look, it's a five to 10-year journey.

ROSS SOLLY: Wow.

REBEKAH BROWN: These things take a long time. Many of the criteria that The Times Higher Education rate and also QS rates, it's education, it's research, it's reputation, it's employability. So some of the criteria have a tail or a lag of three to four, five years. Some of the criteria, the performance we can turn around in two years. So it is – it's complex, really important. And we're on that journey. And ANU are committed to that.

ROSS SOLLY: All right.

REBEKAH BROWN: We have a very high-performing institution. As you know, we have more subjects or more discipline areas in the top 10 in the world than any other Australian institution.

ROSS SOLLY: I think it's 10 o'clock those results will come out, so we'll get an idea then. We're currently ranked at 73rd. As the professor says, we don't want to go any further down the list than that. So we'll wait and see. Thank you so much for coming in and chatting with us this morning. I appreciate it.

REBEKAH BROWN: Yes, thank you. Thank you.

ROSS SOLLY: That's Professor Rebekah Brown, who is the interim Vice-Chancellor of the ANU.

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