



CANBERRA SHOULD BE BUILT TO LAST

21 September 2022

Rebecca Vassarotti MLA
Minister for Environment and Heritage
Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services
Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction

Dear Minister,

RE: TRADE LICENSING

We write to you as representatives of the ACT Construction Industry, with a shared interest in the contributions of that industry to the local economy, environment and the living standard of Canberrans.

The undersigned businesses are all established construction companies operating in the ACT, who are rightly proud of the significant contributions they have made to the Canberra region. They join the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union Construction and General Division ACT Divisional Branch (CFMEU), which represents over 2000 workers in the ACT construction industry.

The undersigned businesses collectively engage some 300 construction workers throughout the city with turnover of more than \$60M a year.

It is no secret that unions and employers do not always see eye-to-eye, but we write to you united in support of a policy we believe is now long overdue in the ACT.

Currently, the ACT requires licensing for only a small number of on-site trades – electricians and plumbers primarily. But there are many highly skilled trades that must be marshalled and managed to produce a high quality, energy efficient, sustainable and enduring structure.

The ACT must introduce formal and comprehensive trade licensing for skilled construction labour; specifically the following trades:

- Carpenters
- Joiners
- Glaziers
- Bricklayers
- Painters
- Plasterers
- Tilers

- Waterproofers

Over the past decade, the ACT has experienced a construction boom. The ACT has also experienced a boom in the number of complaints about serious project failures. These failures often relate to safety, environmental and consumer protections. But most commonly they relate to build quality.

Small defects in any of the trades noted above can result in buildings unsuitable for purpose. For example, water damage is one of the most common complaints to ACT's Fair Trading unit. In many, if not most cases, the culprit is not the plumbing – it is the waterproofing and tiling.

A brief glance through the archives of the Canberra Times reveals a litany of failure in cases ranging from the AIS and Gungahlin pools, to the Belle apartments in Bruce and a range of other units in Gungahlin. Waterproofing is a complicated, exacting and highly specialised trade, in which even the slightest error can lead to an unseen leak that - over time - can damage, or even destroy, a structure. Yet in the ACT right now, any person can hold themselves out as a waterproofer without a license.

To take another example, the tiling performed over the top of the waterproofing layer must be performed carefully and to a high standard to avoid puncturing the waterproofing layer. In the ACT, however, a tiler is defined as whoever picks up a trowel that day.

This situation is replicated with other key structural and finishing trades, such as carpentry and bricklaying, where poorly workmanship may render a finished building dangerously unstable within just a few years.

The ACT's unlicensed environment goes beyond the risk of catastrophic failure, however. As climate change progresses, the weather resistance and energy usage of structures has never been more vital. Indeed, the ACT and federal governments are placing stricter requirements on the insulation standards of all new builds.

But the materials used are only half the story. The skill and care with which these materials are installed will ultimately determine how a building performs. High quality, heat retaining concrete will crack and shift without expert formwork carpenters to install it. Energy efficient double-brick walls will be worse than useless without skilled bricklayers to appropriately space, lay and load them. Highly efficient heating and cooling appliances are wasted when internal walls are poorly plastered allowing leakage into internal building voids.

As an example of the problem the ACT has created, consider the complaints received by the ACT Government about poor quality glazing. This has resulted in tenant advocacy organisations recommending that renters glue bubble wrap to the inside of inappropriate, cheaply installed windows in order to just survive a Canberra winter. Something is seriously wrong.

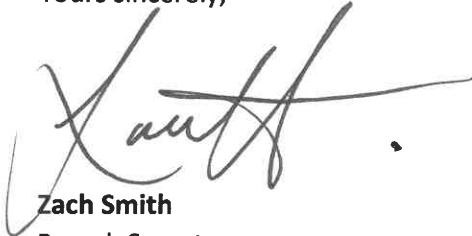
Because these key trades are not currently licensed in the ACT, skilled tradespeople are devalued and reputable companies attempting to produce robust, quality work are ruthlessly undercut.

Builders and consumers should be able to trust the quality of every trade employed on an ACT building site. We can achieve this if the ACT Government introduces a comprehensive occupational licensing scheme to ensure that minimum standards are set and enforced for every form of skilled work in the sector. This is hardly a revolutionary concept. New South Wales, Victoria, WA, and Queensland have each introduced comprehensive licensing schemes.

We ask that the ACT Government take particular note of recent reforms in Queensland, which have produced a licensing system with more than 80 specialised licenses across all areas of the on-site construction industry. After just a few years the new licensing regime has brought shonky, fly-by-night operators to heel without generating any surge in building costs.

Minister, for all Canberrans, it's time to license construction trades.

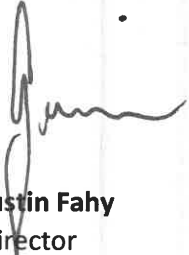
Yours sincerely,



Zach Smith
Branch Secretary
CFMEU ACT



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Director
CTR Pacific



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Director
ACT Interiors



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Managing Director
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