

Will New Gov't Give the Construction Sector What it Needs?

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We have just seen Bill Shorten concede defeat to Malcolm Turnbull in the federal election.

While the election was called after a double dissolution when the Senate refused to pass legislation to re-establish the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), the ABCC barely rated a mention during the campaign.

Set up in 2005 by the Howard Government as a construction industry watchdog, the role of the ABCC was to monitor the sector and enforce civil workplace laws such as restrictions of unlawful industrial action and industrial threats. In 2012, it was overhauled by a Labor Government.

It is important to understand why the reinstatement of the ABCC must be a priority for the new government. The building and construction industry is absolutely vital to the Australian economy and community. Its turnover is more than \$210 billion dollars a year, it provides work for over 1.1 million Australians and it creates the built environment for us all. A thriving construction sector is imperative to the economic well-being of the nation.

Unlawful industrial action and threats occur way too often in Australia's building and construction industry and impose a significant impediment to productivity in the sector. Reinstating the ABCC will be a first step to restoring the rule of law and stemming any decline in productivity. Accordingly, National Precast is right behind the reinstatement of the ABCC and urges its support by all political interests.

It's timely as well to call for the support Australian manufacturing in terms of government procurement, and to ensure that Australian-made is the policy throughout the entire construction process – from asset owners right through to subcontractors and the building products that are specified. Somehow the best of intentions upstream can get lost downstream, with the all too often push to minimise costs. But we all know that has consequences, not only in terms of the impact on Australian manufacturing when products are sourced from offshore, but also the sacrifices in quality that can too often result. Compliance to Australian Standards – or lack thereof – is just one risk that is heightened when sourcing from abroad.

Election times are full of announcements and promises relating to infrastructure. Some of those promises are based on what's in the national interest, but others are based on short-term political mileage – to win votes in a particular seat.

It's about time that changed.

A bipartisan, long-term approach which is part of a structured national infrastructure investment plan and which supports Australian manufacturing needs to be the priority over decisions that are purely short-term vote magnets. The approach should bring good governance and structure to spending decisions, which holds state procurement authorities accountable.

That structured approach should also prioritise safety, productivity and sustainability in the building and construction industry. Australian products that are manufactured off-site, like precast concrete, should play a significant role as they are ideally positioned in all of these areas. The benefits of doing so include measurable increases in productivity.

Given that the construction industry ranks third in terms of the number of fatalities, safety must be a top priority. Improving safety is achieved when projects are assembled rather than built, using products made away from the construction site in a safer factory-based environment. The result is fewer site deliveries, less site waste,

fewer site trades and labourers, making the site a generally less cluttered and safer place to be.

Importantly, structural products like precast can offer on average, 30 per cent faster build times. That all adds up to increased efficiency and improved safety.

With a new term of government just beginning, it is an opportune time for all political interests to consider the importance of the construction and building industry to Australia's future.

Investment needs to be made in the right projects, using the right products, as part of a national vision. In the end, it's not just the industry that benefits, but all the people who work in it, and the Australians who use our critical infrastructure and built environs every day.