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Culture, music hit the NSW election campaign trail



MATTHEW WESTWOOD



An artist's impression of the new Powerhouse Museum proposed for Parramatta, in western Sydney. Picture: Supplied



Dan Sultan playing at a Don't Kill Live Music rally at Sydney's Hyde Park last month. Picture: Joel Carrett/AAP

Not often are politicians too bothered with the arts in a state election but in NSW, cultural matters have elbowed their way into public debate as serious, second-tier issues.

Two policies in particular have driven passionate and sometimes divisive discussion: the future of Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, and the laws and regulations surrounding live music and music - festivals.

The government and Labor opposition have offered starkly different policy choices ahead of the March 23 election. The government's plan to create a world-class museum at Parramatta by shifting the Powerhouse Museum from inner-city Ultimo is an enormously expensive project and has been vigorously opposed by Powerhouse supporters. It is the big-ticket item in a massive investment program the government is undertaking in cultural infrastructure. Labor has vowed to keep the Powerhouse where it is, and to build a separate and distinctive cultural facility in western Sydney.

Music, or rather the dismal consequences of tighter regulation of venues and promoters, is the other hot cultural issue. About 10,000 people turned up at a rally last month to protest against new licensing arrangements imposed on music festivals. An online petition has attracted 126,000 signatures. The festival regulations including health and safety measures are on top of lockout laws that have all but closed down once-vibrant entertainment spots.

The government has acted to prevent the appalling deaths of young people from drug-taking or unprovoked violence but opponents say these overreaching measures threaten to destroy the state's live music culture.

Arts Minister Don Harwin says a \$1 million investment in contemporary music and a night-time economy taskforce are steps towards revitalising the entertainment sector. "I am a strong supporter of music festivals, but there was a public expectation that something had to be done about the very high-risk music festivals that had problems in terms of overdoses and indeed deaths," he says. "This is why the government has acted, in terms of bringing in a licensing regime for a small number of high-risk festivals. The vast bulk of music festivals are unaffected."

Opponents of the festival regulations and of the lockout laws enacted by the Coalition in 2014, in response to the tragic deaths of two teenagers in separate, random attacks, say the cumulative effect is making NSW a "music-free" state. An inquiry into the music and arts economy reports that 176 venues have closed in Sydney since 2014 and says the state faces a "music venue crisis".

Author Mandy Sayer, writing in *Review* at the weekend, points to the dreary strip that Darlinghurst Road has become since Kings Cross was effectively shut down. In Brisbane, by comparison, zoning of a "special entertainment precinct" in Fortitude Valley has ensured that clubs and venues can rock on unhindered.

A coalition of music industry bodies — Live Performance Australia, Australian Festival Association, Music NSW, APRA AMCOS and the Live Music Office — has campaigned vigorously against the imposition of festival regulations and at the government's lack of industry consultation. Midnight Oil, Cut Copy, The Presets, Dan Sultan and Amy Shark are among a long list of artists who have put their names to the Don't Kill Live Music campaign.

Labor has promised to invest \$35m across four years to support the music sector and also to streamline licensing requirements. Arts spokesman Walt Secord says that, if elected, a Labor government will hold a drugs summit, consider harm-minimisation measures at festivals including pill-testing and will consult festival promoters on health and safety requirements.

"I don't think it's fair that the taxpayer has to foot that bill," he says of medical and police presence at music festivals. "I think some of these festivals should make a contribution, but they should know what they're up for, and they can make a decision."

The government has embarked on a massive cultural infrastructure program that will deliver upgrades and new facilities at major institutions and precincts such as Walsh Bay. The Joan Sutherland Theatre at the Sydney Opera House has had a refresh and work will start next year on a \$202m refurbishment of the Concert Hall.

Construction is due to start on Sydney Modern, the new extension to the Art Gallery of NSW, and the Australian Museum will gain a new exhibition hall. Through the government's \$100m regional cultural fund, new facilities are being built across the state, one of the biggest being a new gallery and collection store at Bundanon, Arthur Boyd's former property on the south coast.

The new museum in Parramatta has been cheered by advocates for western Sydney such as Michael Dagostino from Campbelltown Arts Centre, who says moving the Powerhouse seems like an "ideal

option as its collections are broad and capture the western Sydney story of innovation". Opponents have sustained a vigorous campaign since the plans were announced by former premier Mike Baird four years ago.

Cost and concept repeatedly have been called into question by the Powerhouse Museum Alliance and in testimony to a parliamentary inquiry, whose final report last month rejected the Powerhouse move.

The PMA says Ultimo is the museum's established home and its heritage and modern buildings represent a landmark in urban renewal. Parramatta would instead gain a smaller museum, built on a flood-prone site that encroaches on heritage properties, and that is likely to include a block of apartments or a commercial tower.

Ultimo will be retained as a fashion and design museum in an upgraded creative industries precinct with a new lyric theatre and possibly commercial elements.

Harwin rejects the suggestion that these property developments represent a form of privatisation of a public asset. Taxpayers will contribute \$645m for the Powerhouse move. Private investors will offset the total cost of less than \$1 billion, Harwin says, not the \$1.2bn to \$1.5bn that opponents claim.

"I am not scared of the idea of having mixed cultural and other development on one site. This is the direction that's taking place right across Europe and North America," he says, mentioning projects such as the Victoria and Albert Museum's expansion into east London.

"There are some extraordinary things being done overseas and I sometimes think Australians are just a little too limited in their vision of what's achievable."

He says the government will not produce an arts policy as such, given it has already announced its investment in cultural infrastructure, its increased funding to western Sydney, a \$60m injection for public libraries and its 45-year lease of the old Darlinghurst Gaol for the National Art School. He suggests a decision is imminent on the future of the Theatre Royal.

Labor says the government is spending \$760m on cultural institutions that are all within the CBD and \$1.5bn to "forcibly" move the Powerhouse.

Labor instead has promised \$500m for a different museum in Parramatta, \$100m for a western Sydney cultural fund an additional \$100m for the regional cultural fund, \$40m for regional conservatoriums and \$15m to promote original writing for the stage, especially at independent theatres. Secord says Labor will not cancel cultural infrastructure projects already under way.

Voters in NSW have never seen such a bonanza of cultural spending offered by both major parties but on the question of music festivals and the Powerhouse Museum, the choice is starkly drawn.

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