

https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Farts%2Fdon-harwin-saw-state-become-a-construction-powerhouse%2Fnews-story%2F9760d8b97f9604ca5cba840bd4974518&metype=anonymous&mode=premium

15 April, 2020

‘Harwin saw state become a construction powerhouse’

The former NSW arts minister, who resigned after breaking COVID-19 lockdown rules, led a building spree.

Don Harwin’s fall from grace as a minister in NSW’s Berejiklian government was as humiliatingly tabloid as they come. The minister last week was pictured at his central coast holiday home north of Sydney in breach of his government’s own lockdown rules. Harwin held several portfolios and responsibilities — among other things, he was leader of the government in the Legislative Council — but The Daily Telegraph zeroed in on his arts role and the implication of privilege while the rest are doing it tough.

And it was the arts that Harwin clearly loved. Even his detractors concede that his enjoyment and commitment were genuine. He was a regular at the theatre, at the opera and at gallery openings. He was to have been a guest at the Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour production of La Traviata last month, before the lockdown put a stop to that and almost every aspect of our communal cultural life.

Harwin held the arts ministry for little more than three years — he succeeded former Nationals leader Troy Grant — but such was his visibility that he loomed rather larger over the state’s cultural affairs. He came to be overseer of possibly the biggest investment in arts infrastructure ever made in NSW, with projects under way or in the pipeline worth more than \$1.5 billion combined.

NSW was sorely lagging behind other states, especially Victoria, in new and upgraded facilities. The current boom started when former premier Mike Baird promised \$600m for cultural infrastructure, funded with proceeds from electricity privatisation. Baird also announced the government’s intention to move the Powerhouse Museum from inner-city Ultimo to Parramatta in the city’s west.

While Harwin cannot claim bragging rights for all the building projects, he was proud to say that each of the state’s major cultural institutions was undergoing big-budget capital works. These include new exhibition spaces at the Australian

Museum, recently completed upgrades at Hyde Park Barracks and a major refurbishment of the Concert Hall at the Sydney Opera House.

He helped steward government approval of the Sydney Modern Project at the Art Gallery of NSW, to which the state has committed \$244m towards the \$344m development cost. Construction started late last year and work is continuing on the site, due for completion in 2022. Another project, beset by delays, is the redevelopment of Sydney's Walsh Bay arts precinct, where Sydney Theatre Company, the Australian Chamber Orchestra and others will make their home. The government also has invested in regional arts infrastructure, including upgrades at Bundanon in the Shoalhaven, Orange Regional Gallery and Manning Entertainment Centre in Taree, among other projects.

Harwin helped secure renewed leases for the National Art School at the old Darlinghurst Gaol and for the Theatre Royal, which has been dark since 2016. Before the coronavirus pandemic pulled the curtain on venues across town, Sydney had a severe shortage of theatres available to commercial producers. Harwin also revised the system of state arts grants, appointing chairs of "advisory boards" in place of artist peers. He had been criticised previously for intervening in the award of grants after they had been approved.

By far the biggest of the state's cultural projects is the new Powerhouse Museum, which the government intends moving from its present location at Ultimo in Sydney to a purpose-made building in Parramatta. Assessments of the cost vary widely — the government says \$1.17bn, others put it in the region of \$1.5bn — and the rationale for dismantling an existing museum and its collection has been poorly explained.

Opponents say the government, and in particular Harwin, has stubbornly resisted calls for a more responsible outcome for the Powerhouse's existing home in Ultimo and its collections of historically significant industrial, scientific and design objects. The new Parramatta building, designed by Paris-based firm Moreau Kusunoki Architects, puts the museum on "stilts" because the riverside site is prone to flooding. Labor leader Jodi McKay has called for the plan to be scrapped and, as revealed by *The Australian*, Deputy Premier John Barilaro has urged his cabinet colleagues to abandon it.

An upper house inquiry last year rejected the Parramatta move and condemned the "staggering" lack of detail, analysis and evidence to support the costly plans. The government's response, signed by Harwin, asserted its intention to proceed, full steam ahead. That was an unsatisfactory answer for inquiry chairman Robert

Borsak, who last month launched a second inquiry, determined to bring greater transparency to the government's plans.

With Harwin's removal, Premier Gladys Berejiklian has taken over the arts portfolio. The obligations will be relatively few during the lockdown and perhaps a door has been left ajar for Harwin's return. In his absence, the Premier could do worse than approve financial assistance for the state's arts sector. While the cultural building works continue during the COVID-19 crisis, companies large and small are struggling to survive.

--

MATTHEW WESTWOOD