

# Arts minister quits in holiday house scandal

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## TRANSGRESSION

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NSW Arts Minister Don Harwin, who was fined \$1000 for allegedly breaching a public health order set by his own government, resigned from cabinet on Friday, days after being photographed at his holiday house on the NSW central coast.

Mr Harwin issued a statement just before 6pm defending his actions, but conceding that the scandal would become a distraction for the government as it battled the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

A loyal ally of Premier Gladys Berejiklian, the 55-year-old was photographed at his Pearl Beach holiday retreat on Wednesday, more than an hour's drive from his primary residence in Sydney's eastern suburbs at Elizabeth Bay.

Several cabinet ministers told *The Weekend Australian* on Friday night Mr Harwin had acted recklessly by meeting with senior colleagues while, unbeknown to them, hosting a newly arrived guest at his property from the UK, before hotel quarantine rules came into force.

"You had all those cabinet ministers potentially sitting around the table, or meeting Harwin at the executive level, and he potentially infected them," one minister said. "What other MPs has he met with?"

Another minister said: "His house guest just jumped off a plane, and then Don comes to parliament and risks everyone in cabinet."

Since March 30, the NSW government has ordered residents to remain self-isolated in their homes unless they have an essential purpose for being outdoors.

Over Easter, these warnings were reaffirmed, with potential holidaymakers urged to stay out of the regions.

In a statement announcing his resignation, Mr Harwin maintained that he had abided by these rules but that his remaining in his position would create a distraction for the government.

*The Weekend Australian* understands Mr Harwin sought advice on whether he was allowed to travel up the coast from the bureaucrat who wrote the public health order. "At all times I have sought to act in accordance with public health orders and I sought advice that my living arrangements complied with those orders," he said. "I know, however, that perception is just as important during these times."

Ms Berejiklian said she had accepted Mr Harwin's resignation, noting that police had fined him \$1000 for allegedly breaching the public health order and that he had "appropriately" resigned.

"Whilst Minister Harwin has served the people of NSW well, and he continues to assure me that he did not break the rules, the orders in place apply equally to everyone," she said.

Defenders of Mr Harwin told *The Weekend Australian* that he had been residing at the Pearl Beach address since March 13, two weeks before the public health order was made, a decision he took, they said, based on a litany of underlying health issues and advice from his doctor.

A photograph of Mr Harwin with a house guest on Wednesday morning complicated this account; the man in question, Geoffrey Winters, a former Liberal Party candidate, had been living at the home after arriving in Sydney on a flight from London on March 17. Mr Winters stayed at the home under mandatory self-isolation, but Mr Harwin drove to Sydney that week for a cabinet meeting and other tasks.

*The Weekend Australian* understands Mr Winters will be interviewed by police next week.