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- [PUBLIC POLICY](#)
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ALEX MITCHELL. Don Harwin becomes cactus

By [ALEX MITCHELL](#) | On 22 May 2020

In the halcyon days of the NSW Liberal Party's ascendancy, Don Harwin was a fast-rising star. Then he hit a wall and fell from being one of State's most powerful Liberal Ministers to the lowly status of an unloved backbencher. How and why?

For 21 years The Hon Donald Thomas Harwin has been an MP in the NSW Legislative Council holding a brace of important portfolios. He has been Minister for the Public Service and Employee Relations, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Minister for the Arts, Special Minister of State, Minister for Resources and Minister for Energy and Utilities.

At the same time, he served as Opposition Whip (when Labor was in office), the 20th President of the Legislative Council, Leader of the Liberal Government in the LC and Vice-President of the Executive Council, the influential, unelected, undemocratic and secretive body which keeps the NSW Governor abreast of legislation and policy.

His political career began at 19 when he joined his local Liberal Party branch in Lugarno and the Young Liberals at Earlwood. He was a Sydney University student

active in the Liberal Club. He graduated in 1985 with a BA in economics to become a staffer for Liberal Ministers in the Nick Greiner and John Fahey Governments. His career blossomed in the NSW Young Liberals (Motto: Vision today – Leadership tomorrow) becoming President from 1988 to 1990. His closest allies were the now Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, Shayne Mallard, a Minister in today's NSW Liberal Government, who became NSW Young Liberals President in 1993. Mallard succeeded John Brogden, a future Opposition Leader of the NSW Liberals. Another of Harwin's contemporaries in the Young Liberals was Andrew Constance whose political future today remains undecided.

To most voters, Harwin's political career has passed unnoticed. He functioned primarily as a backroom boy who studied marginal seats and how the Liberals could win them.

His tenure as Arts Minister was disastrous and brought him to public attention. Setting himself up as Sydney's arts tsar, Harwin replaced peer assessment boards with his own bureaucrats and handpicked acolytes. Ignoring the need for cultural facilities in regional NSW, he backed the pharaonic Sydney Modern building project at the Art Gallery of NSW.

Above all, he made the demolition of the Powerhouse his pet project, despite a mass of evidence that the cost would rise to \$1.6 or \$2 billion, and that the move would mean splitting the prized collection. In defiance of all precedent he chose a new CEO to be directly responsible to him, rather than to the board, which he stacked with his own appointees.

Hanging over the project has been the stench of secret property deals at both the Ultimo site and Parramatta. Last November one of his recent board appointees, Dexus CEO Darren Steinberg, had to resign over a conflict of interest in relation to Ultimo.

Any criticism was met with staggering arrogance, trashing the commitments to "open democracy" he gave in his inaugural speech to Parliament. In March 2018 when a scandal broke over the Fashion Ball held at the Powerhouse, Harwin stubbornly maintained that the results were "overwhelmingly positive".

A damning Upper House inquiry into museums and galleries, lasting two-and-a-half years, gathered reams of evidence from professionals that the Powerhouse project

was unviable. When the inquiry's meticulous report was published in February 2019, Harwin waited until after the Government was re-elected before contemptuously dismissing all its recommendations.

Barely a year later, he is out of Cabinet and a backbench nobody. His fall from grace in April was spectacular, losing all his ministerial portfolios over the scandal about visiting his holiday home in breach of COVID-19 restrictions. The story broke in the *Daily Telegraph* – but who tipped off the Murdoch rag?

Now he is clearing the decks, putting his Elizabeth Bay apartment up for sale and getting ready for a post-ministerial life.

At the same time, Gladys Berejiklian's departure lounge is filling with alarming speed. Three former Liberal Premiers, Nick Greiner, Barry O'Farrell and Mike Baird, have stepped away from her administration. O'Farrell is going offshore to become the Australian High Commissioner in India.

The "old guard", all from the "wet" faction known previously as The Group, are executing a tactical withdrawal, otherwise known as "legging it". They leave Treasurer Dominic Perrottet as the anointed successor to the Premiership. While NSW voters are distracted by the deathly COVID-19 pandemic, knives are being sharpened in NSW.

Perhaps Premier Berejiklian should use the downturn to consider the remark of French poet/writer Theophile Gautier (1811-1872):

The years I have squandered in puerile excitement, in going hither and thither, in seeking to force nature and time, I ought to have spent in solitude and meditation, in endeavouring to make myself worthy of being loved.

My feeling? It's probably too late. Her enemies are impatient and the knives are out.



[Alex Mitchell](#)

Alex Mitchell is a former Sydney Sun-Herald State Political Editor whose commentary appears every Friday. His latest book is *Murder in Melbourne – The Untold Story of Palestinian exchange student Aiaa Maasarwe*.

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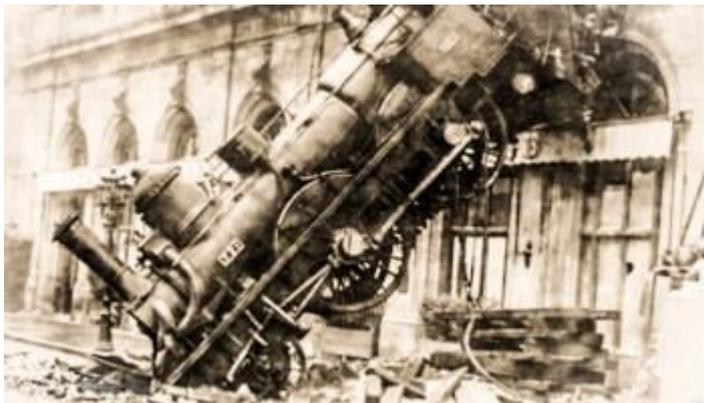
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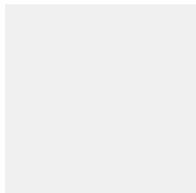
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