

Unusual suspect behind act of cultural vandalism

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12:00AM JUNE 20, 2020 • 13 COMMENTS

Ten days from now, when the bulk of the Powerhouse Museum is closed down, one of the greatest acts of cultural vandalism in Australian history will be committed not by the lunatic left but by a Liberal government. Twelve months later, the remaining parts of the museum will also be shuttered, bringing to an end a presence in the Sydney district of Ultimo that began in 1893.

In theory, the closure is merely part of a shift to a new museum in Parramatta. However, ever since the Baird government announced the move in 2014, the Coalition has repeatedly failed to explain its underlying rationale.

After all, the museum, whose purpose is to showcase science, the applied arts and technology, is in a world-class building that will not need replacing for many decades. Moreover, that building and its storage facilities are uniquely designed to house the museum's extraordinary collection, which ranges from some of the world's most valuable engines to priceless examples of Australian craftsmanship and innovation.

The risk, which increasingly looms as a certainty, is that the move will destroy the collection's integrity, and prevent Australians from accessing a cultural inheritance first formed from the material displayed at the great Sydney International Exhibition of 1879 and which has been enriched since then by generous donations and carefully curated acquisitions.

Nothing better illustrates the problems than the government's inability to address the future of the museum's large objects, which include Matthew Boulton's and James Watt's 1785 steam engine, the oldest rotative steam engine in existence; the stunning railway carriage, lavishly adorned with native timber inlays, made for the NSW railways by the Eveleigh Workshops in 1891 and reserved for the exclusive use of royalty, vice-royalty, premiers and the railway

commissioners; and the Catalina Flying Boat, the largest and heaviest plane to be hung for display in any museum in the world.

Time after time, the government has claimed the museum at Parramatta would readily accommodate those objects. But it is now apparent it will have barely a quarter of the museum-grade exhibition space the Powerhouse currently has. To make matters worse, it lacks adequate storage, with the result that fragile artefacts will either have to be shipped back and forth over long distances or be permanently consigned to offsite storage. That failure is merely a symptom of a decision-making process that has been flawed from the outset. Rather than basing the decision on careful evaluation, the government first committed to a decision and then sought to justify it.

It is consequently unsurprising that the cost-benefit analysis, which was only undertaken once the decision had been made, is risible. Even putting aside technical issues, its striking feature is that it doesn't consider the option of keeping the current museum going.

Rather, the only alternative it examines to a new museum at Parramatta is having no museum at all. Given that framing of the issue, it does not require much foresight to expect the Parramatta option to prove superior. As if that were not bad enough, the government's subsequent attempts at showing the project is worthwhile are scarcely credible. Thus, as costs have soared, so, for mysterious reasons, has forecast patronage — indeed, since forecast patronage has risen more rapidly than costs, unit costs have, astonishingly, declined.

With those analyses comprehensively discredited, the government has fallen back on touting the number of jobs it claims the project will create. But far from justifying its plans, the fact that a great deal of work is involved in demolishing an outstanding building and constructing one that is not fit for purpose simply highlights the project's folly.

Of course, none of that has deterred the project's proponents, including the Powerhouse's hand-picked board.

They have, instead, descended into meaningless rhetoric, with the board claiming, in its latest submission to a Legislative Council inquiry, that the new museum, which is intended to champion the achievements of science and technology, will be a “hyper-platform” whose “social and cultural amplifiers ... set a new benchmark in culturally diverse programming”.

Meanwhile, the museum's purpose has been dramatically diluted. In 1961, it centred on exhibiting objects related to “the industrial advance of civilisation”. That objective, essentially unchanged for

decades, informed the design of the current building.

Now, however, the board describes the new project's purpose as being to provide a structure that "will transcend scale to exist simultaneously as both intimate and iconic", while exhibiting "the current state of place making through the themes of cultural anchors, resilience, disruption, identity and equity".

But unending verbiage cannot disguise the fact that the museum element in the project is being downgraded as greater and greater weight is placed on what is little more than a retail and entertainment complex.

The tragedy that represents goes beyond the threat to a collection that forms an irreplaceable part of our national heritage; it lies also in the glaring inconsistency between the government's insistence on the importance of promoting education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics and its decision to dismember the prime site at which young people could be exposed to their wonders.

Nor is the government even shy about that: the stage-two design brief for the new complex contains barely eight references to the capacity to host children for educational purposes, while referring 155 times to events and performances.

To say that is not to suggest the current museum should stay as it is. As well as better governance, it clearly needs some refurbishing and an expanded budget for outreach and education. At most, however, that would involve outlays of \$150m over three to five years — which pales into insignificance compared with the \$1.2bn to \$1.5bn the move to Parramatta could easily cost.

Unfortunately, the grim reality is that the government has set its sights on the sale of the museum's current premises, making way for yet more of the buildings that have reduced Sydney to a soulless aggregate of towering monstrosities. As for the city's powerful cultural elites, they have little interest in science and technology, and even less in their history.

Yet the "miracles" of technology, medicine and scientific understanding are precisely that. Far more human beings than ever before have a chance of living to maturity, of bearing healthy children, of moving upward from the millennial treadmill of marginal subsistence. To document the path that led there is both to pay tribute to those who made that possible and to inspire the young people who will push Australia forward on knowledge's endless frontier.

It is, in other words, to link this country's past, present and future in a way that should be at the heart of Liberal values.

Those are the values that lead Liberals to utterly reject the far left's cultural vandals, who are intent on "cancelling" our heritage. And they are the values voters can and should expect the government of Gladys Berejiklian to uphold.

It is not too late for that government to reverse a decision that shreds those values entirely. As the Powerhouse's closure fast approaches, it needs to think carefully about which side it wants to be on.

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