

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/berejiklian-splurges-on-pet-projects-but-stints-on-the-basic-up-keep-of-the-arts-20210413-p57irj.html>

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

OPINION

14 APRIL, 2021

## *Berejiklian splurges on pet projects but stints on the basic upkeep of the arts*

*(on line as Harwin: a Jekyll and Hyde Minister)*

[John McDonald](#)

Art critic

April 14, 2021 — 5.30am

Should we be surprised the Berejiklian government [is contemplating a sneaky cut](#) to the operating budgets of major cultural institutions? By now we're accustomed to those familiar patterns of secrecy, lack of transparency, and the reckless disregard for both public and expert opinion. The rule is: "We know best, so suck it up."

For a government that has squandered billions on mismanaged extravaganzas such Sydney's light rail it's a soft option to pull vital funds from museums. Only recently we learnt that the City and Southwest Metro [is expected to cost \\$3 billion more](#) than anticipated. In 2018 the government [spent more than \\$120 million of taxpayers' money fighting lawsuits](#) largely brought about by bungled infrastructure projects. And let's not forget the infamous [proposal to spend \\$2 billion revamping two sporting stadiums](#).

[The demolition of Allianz Stadium at Moore Park in April 2019 with NSW Arts Minister Don Harwin and NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian (insets). *CREDIT: BROOK MITCHELL, STEVEN SAPHORE, KATE GERAGHTY*]

As money bleeds out of public coffers who should bear the cost? At one stage it was National Parks and Wildlife that [had to shed staff, making it difficult to prepare for a bushfire season](#) that turned into a historic conflagration. Now it's the museum sector that is expected to pick up the tab.

Well it's not as if the museums haven't already been doing their best to raise funds, even in a year of crippling lockdowns. The Australian Museum under Kim McKay's leadership has taken every opportunity to attract patrons and make much-needed improvements. Meanwhile, the Art Gallery of NSW nowadays resembles a fund-raising organisation that holds occasional exhibitions.

How on earth does the government intend to fund the huge white elephant called Sydney Modern, which is due to open within the next two years? Having already committed \$244 million to the project I'd be surprised if they're not asked to make another contribution before work is completed.

When it finally does open we'll be faced with an effective doubling of the AGNSW's operating costs and no plan to bring in extra money beyond the "magical thinking" that twice as much gallery space equals twice as many visitors. It's more likely the builders will strike gold while digging the foundations.

And, of course, there's the ongoing saga of the Powerhouse, which has been run into the ground while the government pursues a lunatic, utterly unnecessary scheme of "moving" the museum – or at least part of the museum – to an entertainment complex in Parramatta.

The proposed budget for this is \$840 million but that's a fraction of what would need to be spent if the relocation were realistically costed. In the meantime, having destroyed the Powerhouse's capacity to raise funds and receive bequests, Premier Gladys Berejiklian's team [is happy to trim another \\$10 million](#) off an inadequate annual budget.

The merest glance at these figures shows the huge disparity between the sums that are wasted on pet projects with the most dubious of business plans and the basic upkeep of the state's cultural institutions.

As Minister for the Arts, Don Harwin has been a Jekyll and Hyde figure, giving generous support for entities such as the Sydney Film Festival and the National Art School, but when it comes to the bigger picture he has done little to resist the number crunchers.

Among the biggest casualties have been the regional arts organisations, which have been starved of funds – aside from a few anomalies such [as the \\$30 million spent on a new conservatorium in Wagga Wagga](#), the former seat of the disgraced MP Daryl Maguire and scene of a key byelection.

Every boastful outlay has been tainted by the most shameful pork-barrelling and opportunism. Last year [it was reported](#) that almost \$50 million was spent on regional arts initiatives but only a single grant of \$4000 went to a Labor electorate. Deputy Premier John Barilaro saw \$3.54 million gifted to his Monaro electorate. Another \$2.7 million went to the Singleton electorate of now-disgraced Nationals MP, Michael Johnsen. While handing over millions for non-recommended projects in LNP and marginal seats, the government [is defunding the co-ordinating body, Regional Arts NSW](#), removing its annual stipend of \$440,000.

It's sad to have to keep making the same arguments on behalf of art and culture to politicians who couldn't care less. The bottom line is that culture belongs to everyone. It shapes who we are and what we do, it helps us understand the past and plan for the future. It's not an option, it's an essential service, and a government that doesn't recognise this is acting to impoverish our quality of life and belittle our heritage. Culture, quite simply, is something that strives to make us better, while politics – as it is practised in NSW – can only be defined as an instrument of moral degradation.