

# Harwin's exit is a blow to the arts

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The same astonishing things occurred at two recent Sydney concerts.

The first time, three weeks ago, was at a performance by Bach Akademie at Christ Church St Lawrence. The second, last Saturday, happened at a performance by the Haydn Ensemble at the City Recital Hall.

On each occasion the audience had been alerted to the fact that a certain individual was present in their midst. Both times, the entire audience, together with the performers, broke into spontaneous and enduring applause.

So, who was the recipient of this boisterous adulation? It was Don Harwin, the NSW Arts Minister.

Why? Simply because, for these audiences and their performers, Harwin — largely unknown outside the sphere of government — was rightly seen as the saviour of the arts in NSW.

What was even more startling was this: by last Saturday it was clear that Harwin was no longer to be a minister in the NSW government. Of course, the new Premier has every right to pick and choose his ministry. That is not in doubt. However, we have to ask this question: what political or other imperative led to the departure of a man, widely regarded as the most successful arts minister in Australia? It is unlikely that we shall ever know or understand the answer to this question.

But we must reflect on the achievements and qualities of Harwin as arts minister.

First, he generally admired and respected all manifestations of the arts. He was not one of those politicians who belittle the so-called "elitism" of classical music, theatre and dance. He did not, like some, regard the arts as the fodder of the privileged middle class. He rightly saw the sector as a civilising aspect of our community life.

Second, Harwin was always available to give advice and encouragement. He nurtured and supported smaller ensembles. He attended their performances. Most importantly, he had a vision for sustainability of the arts — a long-term view as to what was needed, not only in the city of Sydney but in western Sydney and the regions. He believed that music and the arts needed to be taken to those communities and districts, often denied by the sheer distance from the major cities.

Harwin was not everybody's cup of tea. No doubt he trod on a few toes. He may have been seen by some to have preferred the smaller ensembles over and above larger organisations, already well-supported. His closeness to Gladys Berejiklian may not have stood him in good stead after Dominic Perrottet's ascension. Whatever his faults, he will be long admired among the arts community. As an erstwhile performer myself, I am conscious that many young performers will be deeply saddened by his departure. The applause at the recent concerts was heartfelt.

So, what is the future for the arts in NSW? There is hope that new Arts Minister Ben Franklin of the Nationals, who has served as parliamentary secretary for the arts, will carry on the vision of Don Harwin, especially in his avowed support for the provision of cultural life and artistic development in the regions. In a recent speech to Parliament, Franklin acknowledged his government's support for the sector. "The government has supported the industry, individuals and organisations in a way they desperately needed ... the government takes this very seriously," he said. "In Sydney, western Sydney and regional NSW, the government knows that arts and culture define much of what it is to be Australian. It will continue to support them in this space for many years to come."

This heartening statement needs to be tempered by the realisation that performance and educative growth in the regions is often facilitated by the smaller urban ensembles that were so supported by Harwin. It is imperative to understand that the future of the arts and cultural life in the regions is entwined with the sustainability and growth of these ensembles.

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