

From
John
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NEWS



[For some reason the old authoritarian slogan didn't work...](#)

There are two reasons this newsletter is a little later than usual. Firstly, I'm on my way back from an outrageously busy week in Hong Kong, where life is bouncing back, post-pandemic, with seeming indifference to the draconian new laws imposed by Beijing. Secondly – and most importantly – I was waiting for the outcome of the NSW state election.

Even though I was away on voting day and missed the pleasure of helping to turf out the Coalition,

I'm delighted and relieved that Premier Perroquet has fallen from his perch.

While the Libs in NSW had at least a few ministers, notably Matt Kean, who attempted to pursue policies that might actually benefit the majority of the human race, they were exceptions to the rule. In NSW that rule seems to be: the longer a party stays in power the more corrupt, shameless, nepotistic, high-handed and self-serving it becomes. After 12 years, the Coalition had become a law unto itself, incapable of listening to well-meant advice and criticism; addicted to secrecy and backroom deals; willing to adopt the most expensive and inefficient options to allow a big party donor to make a fast buck. The final straw would have been the privatisation of Sydney Water – virtually the only asset they haven't already flogged off.

Did we really want the light rail? A billion dollar blow-out, complete disruption of roads around Sydney, much-loved fig trees chopped down, Anzac Parade turned into a wasteland then sold off to developers... and mostly empty seats. I could repeat this question (and answer) with many different projects, but the issue that has loomed largest in this newsletter has been the vandalism inflicted on the Powerhouse Museum.

A few days out from the election – and much to my surprise – the Labor Party made the bold announcement that it would put a halt to the Powerhouse debacle. The story was allegedly offered to my newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, which declined to take it up. In fact, the only outlet that ran the story was *City Hub* – which I now consider a more reliable source of news than the major papers.

Not only did the SMH deliberately ignore an important issue that I've written about in its pages, in an Editorial it advised readers to vote the Perroquet government back in! Judging by those readers' responses – let alone their actions at the ballot box – they did not share the view that Perroquet was a "visionary". My own perceptions of the Premier's visionary abilities took a slight dip when he praised Sydney Modern as the greatest museum in the world.

While silence ruled vis-à-vis the Powerhouse, which was a crucial electoral topic for many people, we had two large articles on the National Gallery of Australia's funding problems. Why the NGA's roof should be deemed more important in election week than the very survival of the Powerhouse

and the potential waste of a billion dollars in public funds, remains a mystery to me. It's enough to mention this strange preference, I'm not going to speculate on the whys and wherefores.

Back in the real world, Labor has a huge task ahead if it means to make good on its Powerhouse commitment. First, it must halt the extravagant, inappropriate makeover plans for the building in Ultimo, and channel some of the money into intelligent maintenance and renovation.

The ghastly edifice in Parramatta which is well on its way to being built, must be cut loose from the Powerhouse, and given a new name, perhaps in honour of David Borger, who worked so hard to keep this disastrous project going when nobody else in Parramatta wanted it. ("Dave's White Elephant" has a nice ring). Once again, money might be sensibly redeployed in giving Parramatta a proper art gallery, which is what it asked for in the first place. The final indignity is that those ungrateful Parramatta voters - who obviously don't read the SMH - punished the Coalition in the election.

In relation to the Powerhouse there are dozens of things that need to be stopped, and dozens more that need to be done. You can read all about it at the PHM Alliance website. One thing that's going to be both important and tricky, is to clean up the administration – meaning a complacent, supine top brass and trustees. Over the past few months we've watched the Powerhouse dump the word "museum" from its title and go headlong into contemporary art and fashion – abandoning everything that constitutes its unique historical identity. Along with the MCA and Sydney Modern, do we need *another* contemporary art museum?

One of the nastiest rumours was that the curators were going to be shunted off to Castle Hill, which would have meant about three hours daily travel for most of them. There's also much blather about "decolonising the museum" – a modish term that should set off alarm bells whenever it is heard, as it serves as a guarantee of ideological narrowness, the closing down of debate, and the stupefaction of audiences.

I'm not suggesting that everyone associated with all those utterly irresponsible and foolish schemes promulgated under layers of secrecy and spin should be removed. They will simply have to change their tune and learn to kiss a new set of arses. Can they manage a 180 degree turnaround, with pike?

If Labor follows through on its promises it's a huge tribute to the tireless folk at the PHM Alliance, who never gave up hope over almost a decade of conflict with an arrogant and brutal government hell-bent on destroying a unique part of Australia's cultural heritage. Medals should be awarded.

This week's art column goes scooting around the Sydney galleries, taking in landscape shows by William & Jonathan Delafield Cook, Luke Sciberras, David Collins and Danelle Bergstrom.

Although there's a world of difference between all these artists, they can't be faulted for commitment and integrity. Don't expect to find any of them on the walls of Sydney Modern.

At the movies, I'm reviewing *EO* – Jerzy Skolimowski's much-acclaimed film about a donkey. No, not the kind of donkeys that have just been voted out of office – a real one. Unlike their political counterparts, the director assures us they are sensitive, humble and intelligent beasts.

[UPDATE](#)



[DELAFIELD COOK, SCIBERRAS, COLLINS, BERGSTROM](#)

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[EO](#)

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