

Newsletter 524

Published January 16, 2024



NSW Minister for Arts and Betrayal, John Graham, looking pretty smug.

Apologies for the gap between newsletters, but when one gets off the hamster wheel – even momentarily – over the Christmas season, the temptation is to stop writing for a bit and pick up a good book or stare dully at the cricket. As it stands, I've had two weeks off the art column, and kept going with the movies, which feels a bit like a holiday.

I'm posting a piece on *Ramses and the Gold of the Pharaohs* at the Australian Museum, which will almost certainly be Sydney's best attended show of the year. As a bonus, it includes a video walk-through, filmed by Tom Compagnoni. I'm also posting no fewer than four film columns: a preview of what's in store for 2024; a review of *Poor Things*, a double review, featuring *Dream Scenario* and *Ferrari*, and

another double, for *The Boys in the Boat* and *The Holdovers*. I'm not going to go into detail, as it's all included in the articles.

Looking for a topic to start the year, I'm afraid I can't go past one particular hobby horse, the Powerhouse Museum. Pardon the apocalyptic tone. If you're feeling exhausted by this issue, you are part of a very big club. After more than nine years of agitation under two governments, the supporters of the PHM are all feeling fatigued and frustrated. To induce such feelings was the abiding tactic of the Coalition government, who refused to consider hard evidence, expert and popular opinion, in its bloody-minded determination to turn a major cultural asset into a real estate bonanza for its mates. Plans were shrouded in secrecy, and attempts at debate were closed down.

Imagine then, how crushing and depressing it is when Labor comes to power, having promised to save the museum and usher in a new transparency, but decides instead to continue the same short-sighted, vandalistic program. The appalling behaviour of the previous administration is being repeated with the added garnish of full-scale treachery.

It's not possible to put a positive spin on Labor's actions: this is an historic betrayal of trust, a sheaf of broken promises, and an act of political bastardry that will have disastrous long-term consequences for the cultural heritage of city, state and country.

Former PHM curator, Kylie Winkworth, has summed up the whole sorry saga in a document called *Labor's Ten Broken Promises on the Powerhouse Museum, and More*. I can't improve on her brilliant summary.

The Coalition and the current management of the PHM have hastened to clear out the collection and truck it to Castle Hill, even though that facility remains unfinished. They have tried to truck the curators to rented offices in Parramatta and Castle Hill, presumably to induce most of them to resign. As the majority of staff probably live within a reasonable proximity to Ultimo, they would be obliged to travel for a minimum of an hour or an hour-and-a-half to get to work each day, and the same to get back. While they sit around, hot-desking, the museum itself would be closed for at least three years.

This casual neglect of the established curators is one of the most perplexing aspects of Labor's approach. The government seems happy to dump those people with

genuine knowledge and concern for the collection and welcome a new group of inexperienced cronies and 'creatives' who have been attached to the payroll. It doesn't seem as if the Minns government has any particular rapport with the unions when they can allow such workplace travesties to take place.

Although Parramatta is expected to open within that time, this edifice could not be described as a museum – it is a function centre with dormitories, and a big food and beverage emphasis. Curatorial input will be strictly limited. They'll need more people to make beds and wash dishes.

The fact that the Arts Minister, John Graham is now saying the PHM Ultimo will be closed for three years from the end of February, is a direct contradiction of his previous promise to keep the museum open. Has this man no shame? He is working in the interests of the developers, of the University of Technology's expansionist ambitions, and the grand schemes of current PHM management, which are guaranteed to send attendances through the floor and create budgetary black holes for decades to come.

CEO Lisa Havilah has expressed her contempt for public consultation in a speech delivered in Adelaide last year, which has now been blocked after a previous mention in this newsletter. Her autocratic approach has seen attendances plummet to levels last seen in the early 1960s, while 'Artists' fees' accounted for more than \$1.5 million in last year's spending, thanks to the idea that "creative responses" to the collection are more important than the collection itself. The success of Leo Schofield's exhibition, *1,001 Remarkable Objects*, proved that simply isn't the case. Now it seems Graham is right on board with this way of thinking, adding enthusiastic endorsements to press releases for hip hop festivals and other ephemeral events, while multiple damage reports about the collection are swept under the carpet.

This is beyond stupidity, beyond political expediency. It's utterly amoral. It shows supreme contempt for those who voted for Labor in the expectation it would halt the destruction of the PHM, as promised. What can one say about politicians who make promises to win elections and quickly contradict them?

The Minister has fallen in line with the strategy, pushed by management and bureaucracy, that everything is too far advanced to be halted or reversed. We may as well accept that Climate Change is now irreversible and so invest heavily in coal

and gas. They are embracing a death wish and imposing it on people who voted for something very different.

The strategy to push the new plans and relocate the collection as quickly as possible was so blatant Labor should have put it on pause as soon as they formed a government. Instead, they allowed everything to continue, avoiding consultation with the PHM's supporters, promising transparency but continuing the utterly un-democratic policy of high secrecy.

It doesn't require a crystal ball to see that whatever it might have cost to stop this development and consider suggestions for renovating and conserving the museum, it will cost a whole lot more when we have three separate venues, none of them attracting audiences, while running up huge bills for the taxpayer. Governments will have spent upwards of \$2 billion to achieve a negative result, when an initial investment of \$400 million would have probably been enough to give Ultimo a face lift and build a new museum or gallery in Parramatta. History will look back at this project as our greatest-ever cultural disaster – initiated by the Coalition and blindly continued by Labor. In world terms, it's a complete embarrassment. What major city destroys its own cultural assets? Take away a major museum, put up a hip hop festival.

A large part of Labor's pusillanimous behaviour is due to the desire to save money, but short-term savings will be bought at the cost of long-term blow-outs. Are they thinking they'll be out of office by then? Is there nobody in the party who can see the iceberg looming on the horizon? We won't go down to the strains of *Nearer my God to Thee*, but to the beat of hip hop.

Never have I felt more disenchanted with big party politics, more willing to embrace Independents, or even the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers, who have acted honorably and responsibly in keeping the Powerhouse issue alive. If the major parties are not simply corrupt, they are corrupt in spirit, preferring to cuddle up to the corporates rather than respond to matters of urgent public concern. Culturally, they are a bunch of barbarians who show no understanding of what is being lost, and no desire to find out.

It's been a long time since the Coalition represented anyone but themselves and their mates, but the Minns government has shown that Labor is no better. It's hardly a mystery as to why so many people feel disenfranchised by politicians and embrace

forms of right-wing populism. One can only stand so much spin over substance. Ignore the voice of reason, as the supporters of the PHM have been ignored, and open the door to that long slide into duplicity, humiliation and chaos.

If you feel strongly about this issue, I encourage you to sign the [on-line petition](#). It does at least show the government there's a substantial block of people who do not accept this new disaster as a *fait accompli*.