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## **Breaking the Powerhouse Museum and Labor's Broken Trust and Promises**

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Image: Arts Minister John Graham. Facebook, NSW Legislative Council

by KYLIE WINKWORTH

I had to check it wasn't the 1st of April when the Sydney Morning Herald reported that Arts Minister John Graham is promising to rebuild public trust in the Powerhouse Museum. 'Trust is broken' he said, delicately not mentioning Labor's 10 broken promises over just nine months in 2023.

'We're keeping the museum open' he announced last September. It is closing on 4 February. 'We're committing \$250m for the Powerhouse Museum'. There is only \$119m over the forward estimates to 2026-27. He hasn't said where the other \$131m coming from, but it will likely be the sale of the museum's Harwood building. 'The PHM will be closed for up to three years'. Not true either. The promised \$250m is not in the budget. In fact the budget papers show a completion date of 2033. The government is hoping everyone will have forgotten what the real Powerhouse Museum was like if and when it reopens in 10 years' time as a creative industries, arts and entertainment centre. That is the real plan, and this is why it is a secret.

'A Labor Government will release key details of the plans for Ultimo and Parramatta' John Graham promised last March. Since then – nothing. Labor has maintained the LNP's iron

shroud of secrecy over the plans for the Powerhouse Museum. There is no design brief, no master plan, no exhibition plan, and no museum plan, all of which would normally be in the public domain in any museum development project in the civilised world. A museum by definition is obligated to operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities. This might be why the museum word has been dropped altogether. It's just Powerhouse Ultimo now; another Labor broken promise.

The Minister's bright idea to restore trust is to appoint a former NSW Labor minister to head a community reference panel to assure the community the museum will reopen and take feedback on what people want in the PHM. This will be after the museum is closed and emptied of its defining collections. In effect the Minister is waiting until the house has burnt down before calling the fire brigade. The museum will be in ruins before anyone is consulted. Communities have been through multiple rounds of consultations since the PHM's sale and demolition was announced by former Premier Mike Baird in November 2014. Everything the community has said about keeping the Powerhouse Museum open, retaining the internationally significant live steam and transport exhibitions in situ, and retaining the Harwood building as an integral part of the museum's operations, has been ignored and misrepresented in multiple consultation reports.

The PHM's CEO Lisa Havilah has made no secret of her disdain for consultation. In her 2021 speech on 'Undoing the Institution' she said I have never been a supporter of asking people what they want or community consultation. Her advice is to stop asking audiences. Institutions lead audiences, not the other way around. At the PHM this mantra has delivered a 33% decrease in visitation since she was appointed five years ago, along with a 56% decline in education participation and a 188% increase in the dollar cost per visitor from \$32.28 to \$92.94. MAAS is the best funded cultural institution among comparable state and national museums, but delivers the worst performance and lowest public impacts.

The CEO's self-described 'visionary new paradigm for the museum is demonstrably an expensive failure. Exhibition costs are up 211% while audiences are down 33%. Commissioning artists, funding creative fellowships and subsidising artists and creatives has displaced the museum's focus on audiences, education, the collection and maximising public benefits. The transformation of the Powerhouse Museum into a creative industries, arts and fashion centre is a flop with visitors and poor value for money.

In any other cultural institution, failing on every performance indicator with declining audiences and higher costs, the CEO would have been terminated. The staff at MAAS have already voted no confidence in the management, going by the dire responses in the annual People Matter survey of public servants. Perhaps the President of the MAAS Trust hadn't read the survey results or the Annual Report when he thanked Lisa for her dynamic leadership. Perhaps that Arts Minister hadn't read the Annual Report either. He is rewarding failure by handing the management \$68.574 million in recurrent revenue for providing no museum services after Sunday. Total taxpayer funding for MAAS in 2023-24 is a staggering \$103,715 million.

The only unambiguously popular exhibition at the PHM in the last five years is Leo Schofield's 1001 Remarkable Objects. Who knew audiences would come flooding back to the museum when it focussed on showing the collection? The exhibition was years in development, involved 120 people, and cost \$4m in design and production. Now it is closing after just six months, wasting taxpayers' investment just to pack the collections off to storage, never to be seen for years. It's the museum equivalent of closing a Broadway hit musical in the middle of the season when punters are clamouring for tickets and the backers haven't

made a return on their investment. Try and see it in its last days and say goodbye to the real Powerhouse Museum.

No one at the Powerhouse Museum's triumphant opening in 1988 could have imagined that only 35 years later the museum would be closed and stripped of its major exhibitions, its most significant collections scattered, and its underpinning narrative and education purpose discarded like an old chip wrapper. A museum built with the highest quality infrastructure for a working life of more than 100 years will be gutted to the bare bricks. What the visionary Wran Government built over ten years of careful planning, integrated design and open communication, the Minns Government is sweeping away in haste and secrecy. The Labor government that promised to save the Wran legacy is now delivering its destruction.

What's happened to the Powerhouse Museum over the last nine years is a tale of political opportunism, waste, asset destruction, lies, broken promises and secretive lobbying to evict the museum from the valued property built and endowed by the Wran Government. The breaking of the Powerhouse Museum began in 2014 as an asset grab and a property play, and this is how it is finishing. For the first time since 1893 there will be no museum in Ultimo, nor in the future. Everyone knows the PHM will never reopen in any recognisable form. The former Labor Minister who will be charged with restoring trust is on a hiding to nothing. After two governments promised to save the Powerhouse Museum, all trust is broken. Instead of saving the PHM the Minns government is rushing its pre-emptive closure for no credible reason. Instead of saving the museum it is wasting the legacy and investment of generations of NSW taxpayers. The public interest has come last in this cultural tragedy, along with the interest and trust of the museum's donors. The looming closure of Sydney's major heritage museum is a shameful cultural and tourism disaster for Sydney, a world first for all the wrong reasons.