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Trade Minister Stuart Ayres Ayres' alleged role in Barilaro scandal Trade Commissioner scandal a 'frustrating' distraction': Premier

After an overseas trade trip overshadowed by events at home, NSW Premier and under-fire Trade Minister Stuart Ayres will return to Australia to increasing internal anger.

[Lachlan Leeming](#) and [James O'Doherty](#)

 4 min read July 29, 2022 - 5:43PM

NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and Deputy NSW Liberal Leader Stuart Ayres may be in trouble amid documents appearing to indicate they misled parliament over the John Barilaro scandal, says Sky News Political Editor Andrew Clennell. Mr Clennell said they had told parliament that no suitable candidate had been identified...

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Multiple scandals facing the state government back home have been a “frustrating” distraction overshadowing a major trade mission, Premier Dominic Perrottet says.

Mr Perrottet and his under-fire Trade Minister Stuart Ayres will land back in Sydney on Saturday night amid increasing internal anger over Mr Ayres’ involvement in the appointment of former Deputy Premier John Barilaro to a \$500,000-a-year New York trade role.

On Friday, Mr Ayres said he was not considering his future as the Deputy Liberal leader despite chatter among his colleagues that he might need to go.

Privately, senior Liberals believe Mr Ayres is continuing to damage the government by digging in and refusing to accept any responsibility for the Trade Commissioner scandal.

Mr Perrottet repeated his position that he will not take any action in relation to the appointment until he receives the findings of an independent review into the process.



Premier Dominic Perrottet, right, and Trade minister Stuart Ayres open the NSW government's trade and investment office in Mumbai on Thursday. Picture: James O'Doherty / Daily Telegraph.

He rejected suggestions that waiting for those findings before taking action is causing further damage to his government.

Mr Perrottet said it was important for him to follow proper “process” and doing “what is right,” even if that creates “political challenges” in the short term.

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Trade Minister Stuart Ayres has denied influencing the hiring decision. Picture: NCA NewsWire / Gaye Gerard

Mr Ayres on Friday maintained that the recruitment process which appointed Mr Barilaro was done independently of government, and overseen by Investment NSW CEO Amy Brown.

That is despite documents released to parliament revealing Mr Ayres spoke to Ms Brown about potential candidates, and even asked for one person onto the “short shortlist” for the New York role.

“I have responded to the information, the updates, the briefs that are provided by the public service, that is all I have done,” Mr Ayres said.

He said he only “endorsed the position” that Mr Barilaro had “secured the position” when the process had been completed.





Former deputy premier John Barilaro was awarded the role but withdrew. Picture: NCA NewsWire / Gaye Gerard.

AYRES' 'FINGERPRINTS ALL OVER' SELECTION

On Thursday Mr Ayres was accused of having his “fingerprints all over” the selection of the New York trade commissioner role, after newly released documents revealed his ‘short shortlist’ instructions.

An email by Investment NSW CEO Amy Brown on February 8 said she had “run through the ‘long’ shortlist” for the New York job with Mr Ayres.

“He’d like to add (redacted) to the short shortlist please,” she wrote.

Earlier in the week he had said: “I have not under any circumstances influenced the decisions of Amy Brown in who she is selecting as senior executives of the public services”.

Shadow Treasurer Daniel Mookhey said on Thursday that the latest documents showed the Minister had misled the public.

“It is now clear that Stuart Ayres has misled the public ... he has very serious questions to answer,” Mr Mookhey said. “Stuart Ayres hasn’t been arm’s length from this process — he’s had his fingerprints all over this process from the moment he became the Minister for Trade.

“Stuart Ayres was telling Amy Brown who should be on the short shortlist. It wasn’t an independent recruiter who was going through all the people who had applied. It was Stuart Ayres putting forward his preferred candidate for this job.”

[Speaking from India, Mr Ayres](#) said the redacted name added to the shortlist was not that of John Barilaro.

He said Ms Brown wanted the name added.

“I think this was a conversation that Amy Brown had with me to update on the process and there was a name Amy discussed about adding to the shortlist and she went and did that,” he said.

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He denied the briefing showed that he was involved in the recruitment process. "These are decisions that are still made by Amy Brown," he said. "Adding names to a list is her decision."



Daniel Mookhey at the inquiry investigating the appointment of former deputy premier John Barilaro to the US trade commissioner role. Picture: NCA NewsWire / James Gourley

Investment NSW also denied a meeting between Mr Ayres and Mr Barilaro ever took place, despite a government document stating the two had met.

A briefing note contained in government documents for Investment NSW chief executive Ms Brown said: "Mr Barilaro has now met with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Hon Stuart Ayres MP who has supported his appointment."

On Thursday afternoon, Investment NSW claimed it was a "clerical error", and the two hadn't met over the role.

"Investment NSW can confirm that an internal CEO briefing cover note contained a clerical error, incorrectly stating that the Minister for Enterprise, Investment and Trade had met with Mr Barilaro as part of the STIC Americas recruitment process," an Investment NSW spokesman said.



Investment NSW CEO Amy Brown has already appeared before the inquiry

Labor has confirmed Mr Barilaro will be called to give evidence to a parliamentary inquiry into his appointment on August 8.

Mr Barilaro told The Daily Telegraph he was yet to receive a formal invitation and had only read about it in the media.

“As I have publicly stated, I’ve been available to attend the inquiry for weeks, with the committee refusing to call me,” he said.

“I’m yet to receive a formal invitation at this stage, and I am disappointed that I have to read about it in the media.

“Labor chooses to play this out in the media, rather than following procedural fairness.”

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Kerry Chikarovski was considered for New York trade commissioner role

Former Liberal leader Kerry Chikarovski was discussed as a possible contender for the US trade commissioner post eventually offered to John Barilaro, sources have revealed.

Linda Silmalis

Chief Reporter

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July 23, 2022 - 6:00AM

The Saturday Telegraph

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Sky News Queensland Editor Peter Gleeson says the speculation surrounding former NSW deputy premier John Barilaro's trade role appointment is a classic case of a "job for the boys gone wrong". Mr Gleeson's comments follow revelations from Mr Barilaro's former chief of staff, Mark Connell, who claimed Mr Barilaro told him...

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Senior NSW government ministers secretly floated having former Liberal leader Kerry Chikarovski “or someone of her calibre” appointed to the now infamous New York trade commissioner role.

The discussions occurred prior to former deputy premier John Barilaro bringing to cabinet a submission to change the state’s new senior trade and investment commissioner (STIC) roles from public service appointment to ministerial appointments.

A source familiar with the talks said the idea to have ministerial appointments was to bolster the calibre of candidates applying to the roles, with cabinet — rather than the public service — deliberating on who would be most suitable.

The source claimed Ms Chikarovski’s name had been raised by senior Liberal Party ministers as the type of person who should be considered.

There is no suggestion Ms Chikarovski was aware she was a prospective candidate.



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Former Liberal leader Kerry Chikarovski was named as someone who could take up the US trade commissioner post. Picture: Jeremy Piper

The claim comes as Labor and crossbench members on Friday blocked a move for Mr Barilaro and a trade post selection panel member to appear before the Upper House inquiry examining the process this Tuesday, with the motion put forward by Nationals MP Wes Fang voted down.

Mr Fang had argued that it was time Mr Barilaro had his say on the matter.



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The role eventually went to former deputy premier John Barilaro, but he has since withdrawn. Picture NCA Newswire/ Gaye Gerard.

Announced by Mr Barilaro in 2020, the five NSW STIC positions and the agent-general in London was modelled on a similar Global Victoria program, with Investment NSW choosing the locations.

By May the following year, documents tabled in state parliament suggested two preferred candidates had been identified for the US posting, with Investment NSW chief executive Amy Brown declaring she made a verbal offer to former Investment NSW deputy secretary Jenny West in August 2021.

This has since been disputed by former Investment NSW general counsel Chris Carr, who this week told the Upper House inquiry examining the appointment that Ms West was never “fully” offered the job.

The source alleged it was around this time that discussions were being held among several senior ministers about the candidates, with Ms Chikarovski’s name raised.

In September, Mr Barilaro brought a submission to cabinet, with the proposal to change the process to ministerial appointments, which would require legislation, being supported by the majority of ministers and former premier Gladys Berejiklian, the source said.

For reasons that are still not clear, Trade Minister Stuart Ayres ignored the cabinet decision, reverting the process back to public service appointments after seeking support from the smaller and more informal “strategy cabinet”.



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The inquiry is now likely to hear how after submitting a CV for the STIC job, Mr Barilaro was interviewed by a panel before undergoing a psychometric test and a second interview.

“Mr Barilaro is waiting to have his say at the inquiry,” the source said.

It is also understood some of Mr Barilaro’s colleagues were approached about whether they had any concerns with Mr Barilaro applying.

On June 17, Mr Barilaro was announced as the successful candidate but has since [withdrawn from the role](#).

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Analysis / Politics

In Barilaro saga, job for close adviser raises yet more questions — and demands a wider inquiry

The hiring of Jennifer Lugsdin, Barilaro's former media adviser (and now partner), to a senior role at Investment NSW warrants investigation.

DAVID HARDAKER JUL 25, 2022 50



FORMER NSW DEPUTY PREMIER JOHN BARILARO AND JENNIFER LUGSDIN (IMAGE: AAP/JOEL CARRETT/LINKEDIN)

John Barilaro's former media adviser — and now partner — was employed in a senior role at Investment NSW at the time the agency was processing the appointment of the apparently successful candidate Jenny West to the plum job of NSW trade commissioner based in New York.

The media adviser, Jennifer Lugsdin, took up the role of senior media adviser in August last year. It was later revealed that Lugsdin and Barilaro were in a relationship after leaving their spouses. Lugsdin arrived at Investment NSW the same month that West, a senior Investment NSW bureaucrat, was told she had the job following an independent selection process. The offer was later rescinded as part of a chain of events that saw Barilaro himself gain the New York posting.

The fact that Lugsdin was employed by Investment NSW has been known in media and political circles but has so far been unexplored in the NSW upper house inquiry into how Barilaro ended up being appointed to the role. The opposition-run inquiry received bombshell evidence last week from former Barilaro staffers that the then deputy premier had sought urgent advice on how to convert the role into a ministerial appointment — and that he had earlier wanted the trade posting “for when I get the fuck out of this place [NSW Parliament]”. This has been denied by Barilaro.

The appointment of Lugsdin raises obvious questions for any investigation into the Barilaro saga. As senior media adviser, how closely did she work with agency head Amy Brown? What did she know about the state of play with the New York job? It also raises larger questions about a political culture where public funds and taxpayer-funded jobs are used for political purposes.



Barilaro scandal raises big questions for a strangely passive premier

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In an emailed response to Crikey's questions, Investment NSW defended the integrity of Lugsdin's appointment.

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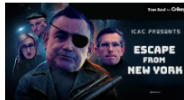


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"Investment NSW engaged the services of an external recruitment agency in late July 2021 to provide a contingent labour resource to support the media team in a newly created agency," it said.

"The short-term engagement with the agency supplier, who was the employer of Ms Lugsdin, ended in December 2021.

"The agreement with Ms Lugsdin's employer was in accordance with the NSW government Pre-qualification Contingent Workforce scheme, with Ms Lugsdin assessed as the most qualified and skilled candidate following the review of a number of applicants put forward by four pre-qualified suppliers."



Barilaro opts out of job, but Perrottet's problems remain

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Crikey attempted to contact Jennifer Lugsdin at her new role as senior communications and media officer at the NSW Department of Communities and Justice but we received no response.

In terms of public perception, though, the appointment of Lugsdin risks being seen as symptomatic of a revolving-door culture where the government uses the public service for its own purpose.

This is the very culture that led to Barilaro using the public purse to fashion a benefit for himself via the New York trade job, if we are to believe evidence that last week emerged from former Barilaro staffers (disputed by Barilaro).

Barilaro had also employed 25-year-old Bridgette Joyce, daughter of then National Party leader Barnaby Joyce, as a senior adviser. The taxpayer foots the bill for these jobs, but because they are classed as political they are not subject to public service employment standards.

Turmoil surrounding Barilaro

The events that preceded Barilaro resigning from the NSW Parliament in October last year show the turmoil that had engulfed the then deputy premier and those around him.

In late 2020 Barilaro took a month's mental health leave after he threatened to withdraw the National Party from the NSW Coalition over government policy on koalas.

In May 2021 he took legal action against YouTube comedian Jordan Shanks over corruption allegations made by Shanks. ([Barilaro was ultimately awarded \\$715,000 in damages in an action against Google.](#))

By August several of his staff had moved on, including Lugsdin.

In early October Barilaro resigned from Parliament and also announced he had split from his wife Deanna after 26 years. The couple have three daughters. In the wake of his resignation, (unfounded) rumours surfaced that Barilaro had been having an affair with Bridgette Joyce. It later emerged that Barilaro was involved in a relationship with Lugsdin, who had also left her marriage.

Limits of NSW upper house inquiry

The NSW upper house inquiry, run by the public accountability committee, has produced a drip of damaging revelations on the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring that led to Barilaro's appointment. Yet it has also been hampered by the government's refusal, so far, to produce key documents requested by the committee. The opposition has flagged that it may recall the upper house for an urgent sitting this week if the government doesn't play ball.

At the same time, there is a parallel review underway through the department of premier and cabinet, being run by former NSW public service commissioner Graeme Head.

However, neither review appears to have the scope to investigate the revolving-door culture at the heart — at least in terms of public perception — of the Barilaro saga. That may only be possible in a powerful inquiry fully independent of the government, one with the ability to compel evidence.

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**New South Wales politics****A 'female focus' and short shortlists: the long road taken to fill NSW's New York trade role**

A series of revelations has raised new questions about how former NSW deputy premier John Barilaro ended up appointed to the trade commissioner job

**Michael McGowan**

🐦 @mmcgowan

Sat 30 Jul 2022 06:00 AEST

Last December, as staff inside Investment NSW were preparing to resume the search for a senior trade commissioner based in New York, a brief spelled out instructions given to the recruitment firm charged with finding candidates for the job.

The company was to “focus on female candidates”, according to a copy of the brief prepared for the agency’s chief executive, Amy Brown, that was obtained through parliament.

There is evidence they tried. After former senior public servant and businesswoman Jenny West’s verbal offer for the role was revoked in August, the company, NGS Global, ran a second round of recruitment.

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Among the interviewees for the job was Kimberly Cole, a senior businesswoman who met with the trade minister, Stuart Ayres, in March. Other documents suggest another person who was interviewed for the job was also a woman.

Former NSW Coalition leader Kerry Chikarovski is also understood to have been in the mix for the role. She did not respond to requests for comment on Friday.

Instead, in June, former NSW deputy premier John Barilaro was announced as the successful candidate for the lucrative role.

This week, as the controversy surrounding his now-abandoned appointment entered its second month, the focus turned to Ayres, the deputy Liberal party leader who took over the trade portfolio after Barilaro announced his resignation from parliament last October.

Despite repeated assurances from the government - and Ayres himself - that Barilaro's appointment to the plum job was handled by the public service at arm's length from ministers, a series of revelations has raised new questions about how he ended up in the job.

On Thursday Guardian Australia revealed that on 8 February this year, Brown sent an email to colleagues in the agency stating that she had met with Ayres to "run through" the shortlist for the New York position.

During the meeting, Brown wrote, he asked her to add a name.

The name, which remains a secret, was not Barilaro's. It raises an interesting subplot: was Ayres, who previously said he knew Barilaro might apply for the job because the former deputy premier told him via text message in December, actually trying to block his candidacy?

Ayres himself said during a press conference last month that he "had some concerns" Barilaro's candidacy could "create some political contention".

"I think I can say to everyone here, I'm hardly known as the flag bearer of the John Barilaro fan club, but he's a private citizen and we've got to be able to make sure that any private citizen who applies for a role gets a fair hearing," he said at the time.

But at the same press conference, Ayres also said that "politicians have not played any role in the selection and recruitment process" of the New York trade role, and that any attempt on his part to direct the public service over hiring would have amounted to "undue influence".

Ayres has continued to deny he influenced the process. During a press conference in Mumbai on Thursday, he said: “I have not under any circumstances influenced the decisions of Amy Brown in who she is selecting as senior executives of the public service.”

But the documents at least call into question the government's claim the process was handled entirely by the public service. In fact, emails from within the agency suggest Ayres' involvement extended to instructions on which media outlets to advertise the position in.

The documents have placed intense pressure on Ayres, who is due to return with the premier, Dominic Perrottet, from an overseas trade trip over the weekend. A number of senior ministers within the government are furious that the saga shows no sign of letting up, with further hearings of the parliamentary inquiry probing the posting to be held next week. Barilaro himself is due to appear on 8 August.

The Labor opposition's refusal to call for Ayres' resignation similarly suggests there is no appetite on their part to bring to a close a saga which has completely derailed the government's agenda less than a year out from the next election.

As shadow treasurer, Daniel Mookhey, said on Thursday: “Our preferred remedy here isn't just to get rid of Stuart Ayres. It's for the people of New South Wales to get rid of this government.”

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When the hearings do resume, with Brown to appear for a second time, much of the focus will be on the timeline of the appointments.

When she first appeared before the committee in June, Brown said she made the call to hire Barilaro on 1 April, after interviews were held in mid-March.

She said she told Ayres of her decision sometime that month, and that he responded: “You're the decision-maker, so it's your decision.”

But other documents released to parliament have muddied that timeline. As reported by Guardian Australia, a briefing document states that Investment NSW was still waiting on “ministerial feedback” on the position by 28 April, while other previously unreported documents raise further questions.

On 3 May, Brown wrote an email to three staff members in her agency asking for a

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copy of the role description for the New York job.

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“When you have a spare moment (not urgent), could someone please send over the RD for STIC Americas? For a contact in (sic) mine who hasn’t applied for the role, but might consider it if it came around AGAIN!” she wrote.

Then on 28 May, an email from the head of the recruitment firm tasked with headhunting for the role sent Brown an email containing reference reports for “the top two candidates” for the job: Barilaro and Cole. “As discussed,” the recruiter wrote.

Investment NSW did not respond to questions about the email, but those dates – well after Perrottet was told of Barilaro’s appointment on 30 April – will be of keen interest to the committee, as will another email, sent on 29 September, stating there was still a “preferred candidate” for the job prior to the second recruitment process commencing.

To understand its significance, you need to go back to the woman who almost did get the job. In August, former senior public servant and businesswoman Jenny West was verbally offered the role.

Brown, who was then her boss, sent her a signed brief from Gladys Berejiklian, still the premier at the time, noting she was the “successful candidate” for the posting.

“This is one to frame,” she wrote in a message which included emojis of a champagne bottle and the Statue of Liberty.

But, as has been widely reported, the job was scuppered when Barilaro, a week before his resignation, took a decision to cabinet to have the senior trade roles appointed by ministers. That decision passed on 27 September.

In her explosive testimony to an upper house inquiry earlier this month, West claimed Brown told her during a meeting that the job would be “a present for someone”.

On Thursday, Mookhey said Brown had been recalled to answer the committee’s “additional lines of inquiry”.

“I think that the committee certainly has more information about which means that we are in a better position to test the evidence or witnesses,” he said.

Barilaro has since withdrawn from the position, citing the intense media attention his appointment had garnered, but has said he “always maintained that I followed the process”.

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