

**Submission  
No 99**

**INQUIRY INTO GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE  
POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND  
CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Submission to the Upper House Inquiry into the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales

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**a) Proposed move of the Powerhouse Museum**

- (i) The essential purpose of any museum is the preservation and care of its collection, in the public interest and as a matter of heritage. In this regard the proposed change to the Powerhouse is not a "move" at all; it involves the dismantling of the collection and its scattering to various locations, much of it to storage. Museums may also have events, catering and other commercial operations to increase revenue and support the core function, but if these operations replace or adversely impact on care for the collection, the institution has lost its way. This is clearly the case with the Parramatta plan.
- (ii) The previous Parliament's Upper House inquiry revealed serious flaws in the governance of the project and, while it forced the release of some documentation, left many questions unanswered. The motion put in the Legislative Council by the Select Committee's chair on 13 May, for the tabling of relevant documents, is to be applauded and must be complied with in full as a matter of government accountability, before said questions can be fully addressed.
- (iii) The risks in the move were documented in the previous inquiry as major concerns; and events since have only underlined their seriousness.
- (iv) The February 2020 floods should have occasioned an immediate halt to the project. The fact that this did not happen is a serious dereliction of duty by Government.
- (v) Recent developments have shown a complete disregard by Government of the heritage importance of both the Ultimo and Parramatta sites. The plan for Willow Grove in particular shows a readiness to bulldoze heritage in the interests of developers.
- (vi) Secrecy surrounding the sale of the Ultimo site is one of the most disturbing aspects of the plan. Details of the sale, including when any deal was negotiated as well as the use of proceeds, must be made public.
- (vii) Government has arrogantly refused to address the recommendations of the previous Inquiry. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it must do so as a matter of urgency (see below).

**b) Government's management of all museums and cultural projects in NSW**

- (i) Current Government policy needs to be completely revised in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, from which there will be no quick "snap back". In particular:
  - Visitor projections for all plans must be revised given that there will be no rapid return to pre-pandemic levels of either international or domestic cultural tourism. This is the case not only for the proposed Parramatta institution but crucially for the Sydney Modern Project at the Art Gallery of NSW *for which the business plan has never been*

*revealed*. The claim that visitor numbers will double is now dubious at best, raising concerns that the institution may be forced to curtail core functions still further, or impose an entrance fee. Business plans for cultural infrastructure must be made public for peer review by qualified professionals.

- The function of museums which can best be revived in the pandemic and post-pandemic world is their core function, of enabling the public to contemplate life-enhancing objects of beauty or interest, rather than operating as entertainment venues. This requires ending the damaging efficiency dividend, and investing in curatorship and care of collections. If it means scaling back vanity projects promoted by Sydney business elites, so be it.
- Equitable access to cultural facilities for regional NSW means two things: First, reviewing capital expenditure so that it is not so Sydney-centric as under the current “cultural infrastructure” plan; museum specialists have pointed out that 10 regional museums could be built for a small fraction of the cost of the Powerhouse project. Second, maintaining the existing major State institutions of the Powerhouse, Art Gallery, Australian Museum, State Library and Opera House in good order in their current central locations so that visitors to Sydney from the regions can easily access and enjoy them.

#### **c) Other related matters**

The issues being examined by the Select Committee have become a test of government accountability. The secrecy surrounding both the Powerhouse plan and the Sydney Modern Project is profoundly disturbing. Cultural institutions cannot be allowed to become pawns in party-political power plays and secret deals with vested interests. In particular:

- Governments should not claim “Cabinet confidentiality” for concealing business plans and projections for cultural institutions.
- The method of board appointments for statutory institutions requires review so that appointments are made at arm’s length from party political considerations.
- There must be an end to direct political control of the management of institutions as has been initiated at the Powerhouse, where the CEO now reports directly to the Minister instead of to a board.

Finally: State cultural institutions belong to all the people of NSW, not to politicians, developers or other privileged groups. They are essential to our heritage. The Select Committee has before it crucial work to ensure that this remains the case.