

# Harwin's allies blame 'factional hit' for downfall

Lisa Visentin, Jordan Baker

Liberal insiders say fallen state government minister Don Harwin was betrayed by his own party colleagues in a "factional hit" designed to destabilise Premier Gladys Berejiklian.

It comes as other government sources suggested Gosford Labor MP Liesl Tesch was behind the leak that Mr Harwin had relocated to his Pearl Beach home during the pandemic.

Ms Tesch denied alerting *The Daily Telegraph* to his whereabouts and said she did not know he was in Pearl Beach, which is in her electorate, until the story broke on Thursday.



Premier Gladys Berejiklian said she backs the police "completely".

Mr Harwin resigned as Arts and Indigenous Affairs Minister on Friday after he was fined \$1000 by NSW Police for breaching the coronavirus public health orders, which ban non-essential travel without a "reasonable excuse".

But Mr Harwin's allies in the party's moderate faction claim the leak was an inside job orchestrated by the centre-right faction, and point the finger at federal Liberal MP Lucy Wicks, who holds the central coast seat of Robertson.

"It wasn't the Labor Party that tipped off the media - this was a factional hit by the centre-right," one NSW minister said. "Hell will freeze over before the centre-right are rewarded for this act of bastardry."

Mr Harwin is a senior member of the dominant moderate faction, which holds the most Liberal seats in the NSW cabinet, and a close ally of Premier Gladys Berejiklian.

A spokesperson for Ms Wicks denied she or anyone in her office leaked information about Mr Harwin.

NSW Police would not clarify yesterday on what grounds Mr Harwin had been fined. Mr Harwin has maintained he relocated to his holiday home before the public health orders were implemented on March 31 and was "confident" he had not breached them.

Assistant NSW Police Commissioner Karen Webb said on Saturday: "All I can say is there was a complaint received by police, an investigation conducted and an infringement issued."

Ms Berejiklian said she had total confidence in the police, saying: "I back the police completely."

She ruled out an immediate reshuffle to replace Mr Harwin in the cabinet, saying she would assume his portfolio responsibilities.

As a blame-game gripped NSW Liberals yesterday, Ms Tesch was forced to defend claims she doorknocked a Pearl Beach household asking to check their driver's licence, and stopped to photograph the identification of a passerby on the street.

Ms Wicks' office was sent a complaint from a constituent on Friday about Ms Tesch's decision to doorknock a family home, asking a father and daughter living there to show her their driver's licences.

The letter from a constituent, seen by *The Sun-Herald*, was sent on to state authorities. It said: "It seems our state member is roaming the streets of this village."

Ms Tesch said the fact the complaint was made to Ms Wicks' office made it seem "very politically motivated". Ms Tesch confirmed she doorknocked the house on Thursday morning and also asked a few people on the street if they were locals.

"The community was saying, 'Liesl, go and check that address.' The community is so concerned," she said.

She then stopped some passers by further down the street to ask why they were in Pearl Beach. "I said, 'Are you guys local, I'm the local member of Parliament, I'm just checking we haven't got out-of-towners', and he showed me the health orders."

Ms Tesch said her job as a local member was to do "everything I can to ensure the safety of my community".



Don Harwin announcing the winning bid for the new Powerhouse museum design. Photo: Nick Moir

# Pearl Beach locals want to know who doxxed on Don

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to put Tesch in the frame, pointing towards complaints that she had been asking people in the area for proof of their address and insinuating she was "boasting" about her scalp.

But Tesch said she had nothing to do with Harwin's demise. She learnt he was living at Pearl Beach with the rest of the world by media and went there for the first time in three weeks the next day amid concern from locals. "All I want to do is keep the oldies safe," she said.

Another theory is that it was an internal job. Until Thursday, when his picture was plastered across the front page of News Corp's *Daily Telegraph*, only close observers of NSW politics were likely to have heard of Harwin.

But within the NSW Liberal Party, to which he has devoted 30 years, he is a powerbroker. He is a senior figure in the dominant moderate faction, a key numbers man and close friend to Premier Gladys Berejiklian.

"There are a lot of people who owe their careers to Don," one MP said.

Many remain loyal to him. "There are few people in Parliament who have done more for the Liberal Party than Don Harwin," Energy Minister Matt Kean said. "A large part of our success is due to his strategic political skills."

One minister said: "I think it's ironic that on Good Friday another innocent man was crucified."

But Mr Harwin is less beloved in



Energy Minister Matt Kean said few people had done more for the Liberal Party than Don Harwin.

other factions, and some may have seen his transgression as an opportunity to create a vacancy. By midday on Friday, when the story was dominating the airwaves, senior ministers were lobbying Berejiklian to move on Harwin. Said one minister: "In the end he lost everybody, including those in his own faction."

Some were also concerned by Harwin's decision to allow former Liberal candidate Geoffrey Winters to isolate at his home after he returned from London, where the coronavirus pandemic was taking hold.

"He could have contaminated all of us," one minister said, claiming Harwin had attended at least one cabinet meeting in person during that period.

Another senior government source said Mr Winters' presence at the Pearl Beach home was a key reason why "this had to nibble in the bud".

"When people return from overseas they are supposed to self-isolate, not isolate with someone else," they said. Also causing consternation among Liberals is the fact the reasons for Harwin's fine remain unclear. "There are still serious questions around whether the fine will stack up," an MP said. "This seriously undermines the rules because it seems they are being inconsistently applied."

Yesterday one of Harwin's allies said he was contemplating leaving politics altogether. "He is definitely thinking about the next chapter," the MP said.

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# Calls to scrap Powerhouse move after minister resigns

Linda Morris

The state government is under increasing pressure to abandon the Parramatta Powerhouse Museum after the resignation of the project's leading advocate, former arts minister Don Harwin.

Opponents doubled down on their criticism of the \$1 billion relocation project, with the arts sector calling on the NSW Premier to instead give urgent priority to immediate heart-starter measures to revive the state's cultural life.

NSW is alone among Australia's major states yet to have specifically redressed the financial impacts on theatres, museums, galleries and arts workers of the pandemic. A decision by NSW Treasury is expected soon.

From inside state cabinet and his

position on the expenditure review committee, Mr Harwin had been a passionate champion of the arts, said Museum of Contemporary Arts chairman Simon Mordant.

"He set up artform boards made up of people who had deep experience in relevant sectors and they advised government on policy and grant making and he came to everything," Mr Mordant said. "He was highly visible and for the first time the state and federal minister of arts were both from NSW and were actively engaged in the arts, in government and across the bureaucracy."

Mr Harwin pushed through Sydney Modern, the expansion of the Sydney Opera House and the redevelopment of Walsh Bay, along with the controversial Powerhouse move.

*'With the minister gone this project must follow.'*

David Shoebridge, Greens MP

Greens MP and deputy chair of the upper house inquiry into the Powerhouse project, David Shoebridge, said it was now time for the government to "admit its mistake, step back, and save this iconic institution".

Infrastructure NSW has badged the Parramatta Powerhouse part of its \$97 billion COVID-19 recovery program and is pushing ahead with online public consultation amid the pandemic.

Public meetings and forums have been replaced by online surveys and webinars hosted by the Powerhouse's chief executive, Lisa Havilah.

Even before Mr Harwin's resignation, Labor had used the pandemic as justification for "killing" the Powerhouse move. "It is a monumental 'dripping roast' of waste costing at least \$1.5

billion," said the opposition's arts spokesman Walt Secord.

Mr Shoebridge said the Powerhouse project was neither shovel-ready nor worthy. "With the minister gone this project must follow," he said.

National Association of Visual Arts executive director Esther Anatolitis referred to an Australian Bureau of Statistics report that revealed less than half of Australia's arts and recreation businesses remain trading at present.

"With most artists, arts workers and organisations unable to benefit from federal government income support measures announced to date, the state has a critical responsibility to prevent the collapse of the NSW arts industry," she said.

with Andrew Taylor