

'Contemptuous' Powerhouse business case remains shrouded in secrecy

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The Berejiklian government has evaded a parliamentary order requiring it to produce the business case that justifies the relocation of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.

Coalition backbencher Matthew Mason-Cox risked suspension from the Liberal Party room to cross the floor of the Upper House in support of a Greens' motion to have the critical set of documents released within 14 days.



The site of the new Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta. Photo: Louise Kennerley

At the close of business on Thursday night, the secretary of the Premier and Cabinet, Tim Reardon, asserted to the Parliament that no documents covered by the resolution were held by the Office of the Premier, the Office of the Minister for Arts, Department of Planning and Environment, including Create NSW, and Infrastructure NSW.

This seems at odds with Arts Minister Don Harwin's own statement to the *Herald* earlier this month in which, through a spokesman, he said: "The business case was delivered to the government in December, and has since been going through a number of assurance processes that need to be completed before an informed decision can be made."

The legal manoeuvre wins the government extra time as an announcement is soon to be made to build a new flagship Powerhouse Museum on the Parramatta riverside

topped by residential apartments. It is believed the government is planning to release a summary of the business case then.

The Powerhouse relocation policy has been controversial since it was first unveiled as a 2015 election commitment by then-premier Mike Baird.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian has continued to reiterate the government's position, despite estimates that the relocation plans could cost up to \$1.5 billion, saying: "Let me be clear, there will be one Powerhouse Museum in NSW. It will be across the river here [in Parramatta]."

However, in a slight reconfiguration of the policy, Ms Berejiklian said the Ultimo site would retain an "arts and cultural presence" as part of any redevelopment.

Labor attacked the government's move as "contemptuous".

"Either this is a massive cover-up, or worse, there is no business case at all," opposition arts spokesman Walt Secord said.

Greens MP David Shoebridge said the battle to force transparency on the government would now return to the Upper House next week where "the government's contempt for transparency will again be tested".

"This was an order of the Parliament and the Coalition government has again sought to avoid scrutiny this time alleging there is no preliminary or final business case to produce," he said.

"It's now getting to the point of farce, denying the final business exists when even their Arts Minister said it was delivered to him in December last year.

"This is now a test of democracy between an increasingly unaccountable executive government and the Parliament."

Chairman of the Upper House inquiry into the Powerhouse move, Robert Borsak, said it was astounding that no documents had been produced by the government when the matter was before Cabinet.

"The government said they received a business case before December, so they must have it or you have to call them liars," he said.

Justifying his decision to vote against his own party two weeks ago, Mr Mason-Cox said the state government had developed a "perverse culture of secrecy" that had threatened the public's confidence in its decision making.

Mr Harwin, through a spokesman, said the NSW Government was committed to moving the Powerhouse to Parramatta and was "proud to be giving families in western Sydney greater access to one of the city's great cultural icons".

"It has been a thorough process and we will have more to say about this project in the near future."

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Thank you Mr Mason-Cox.
NSW taxpayers owe you a few hundred million...

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