

7 March, 2018

Minister wants answers over Powerhouse Museum fundraiser allegations

By Linda Morris (in the *Sydney Morning Herald*)

The arts minister Don Harwin has demanded an urgent report from the director of the Powerhouse Museum Dolla Merrillees, into allegations that museum executives participated in a night of drunken revelry after a museum fundraiser. Shooters, Fishers and Farmers party MP, Robert Borsak, who heads the Upper House inquiry into the relocation of the Powerhouse Museum, raised in Parliament on Tuesday evening reports that senior security personnel attended the museum's executive offices after the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences' inaugural Fashion Ball following a noise complaint and found several prominent Museum staff "intoxicated, drinking Moet & Chandon in the presence of white powder".

Mr Borsak has called for an immediate investigation into this "code of conduct breach" to establish if members of the Museum's senior executive team were present and asked the matter be referred to the police. Under its ethics code, all museum employees are barred from using alcohol or drugs or smoking on museum premises and while performing their duties.

The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences' inaugural Fashion Ball was to raise funds for the Australian Fashion Fund, set up to acquire garments to strengthen the museum's fashion collection. Almost 300 of the country's top fashion heavyweights, including designers, editors, celebrities and arts patrons, frocked for an event described as Sydney's answer to the Met Gala, held in May in New York City.

Joining them was the foreign minister Julie Bishop and Mr Harwin, as well as the museum's key executives including its director, Ms Merrillees.

At the fashion gala, the museum announced an Akira Isogawa retrospective exhibition to be staged in the summer of 2018-19. The \$1,000-a-seat ticketed event was deemed a publicity success, engaging the fashion industry in the work of the museum, but staff are said to be livid with the conduct of executives and are understood to have raised the matter with the Public Service Union. The Herald has spoken to staff who claim the group was "moved on" at 8am the next morning.

Mr Borsak said: "I'm concerned by reports that suggest drugs may have been involved. I want an ironclad guarantee from Minister Harwin that staff at the Powerhouse Museum will not be subject to a witch-hunt for blowing the whistle on this debauchery. This needs a full and immediate investigation."

But in a statement released Wednesday MAAS said it had hosted a "small post-event function to recognise the efforts and achievements of the team". The Museum had no record of a noise complaint being received and neither security or police "were required to attend". "No complaints about the post-event function were received. Further, we refute the allegations of illegal activity at this post-event function." The museum had investigated and documented reports of inappropriate alcohol use during the Ball by one staff member and a "formal letter" had been issued.

The controversy couldn't come at a worse time for the museum with NSW Cabinet considering the business case to shift the Powerhouse from its Ultimo site to a new riverside location in Parramatta at a potential cost of more than \$1 billion. Morale, said one insider, was "rock bottom". While Museum staff were supportive of a museum in Western Sydney, and confident that the collection and the staff expertise would ensure a great museum was run at Parramatta and

sites its Ultimo, Sydney Observatory and Castle Hill they could see no reason to de-commission the Ultimo site. Staff fear this alleged incident will only give the government greater impetus to "start again".

Stewart Little, PSA general secretary, said he worried museum management was undermining the best efforts of its staff whose jobs are under threat from cutbacks and possible closure, and not forcefully pushing the case for retention of the Ultimo site. "It's like being on the Titanic and they want to get off," he said. "Do you think they are concerned about staff or their own futures, given the uncertainty?"