

Sydney Morning Herald: 3 March, 2019

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No expense spared for museum ball

The Powerhouse Museum's failed fashion ball fundraiser is to be referred to the NSW Auditor-General as it has been revealed at least one board member quit in frustration because she had been kept in the dark over its budget.

Former trustee Janet McDonald resigned in March 2017 but her reasons have only now been revealed with the publication of in-camera evidence she gave to the upper house inquiry into the Powerhouse Museum's relocation.



Former Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop and David Paton arrive at the MAAS Fashion Ball at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. *CREDIT:DOMINIC LORRIMER*

"I asked where the budget was and who was paying and how many people were going and was told not to worry," she told the committee on February 11. "It was all sponsored and paid for." She added: "That was \$300,000 lost to the museum. That is why I resigned."

It was the second tenure for the experienced trustee who has sat on the board of the National Library, Australian Centre for Young People and chaired the National Breast Cancer Centre.

She told the committee she returned to the board of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in 2016 to find the museum finances and management a mess and the board directionless. She quit when she was told she must put any concerns around budget in writing to the chairman, Prof Barney Glover.

A draft budget for the ball obtained by the *Sun-Herald* under freedom of information laws also shows that no expense seemed spared in putting on the event with key organisers fussing about the quality of wine served, celebrity attendance and aspiring to "elegant fundraising".

Of the original \$333,000 budget, \$30,000 was estimated for entertainment, \$50,000 to decorate and style the night with Museum to the Moon as its central theme and \$64,000 for catering.

A calligrapher, stage manager and two assistants, make-up artist and event photographer were to be hired for the occasion along with a production manager (\$7000), audio director (\$3500) and lighting designer (\$2500) to coordinate the scenic and theatrical lighting design itself costing \$25,000. A media wall to photograph arriving guests was to be installed at a cost of \$15,000 with a black carpet, and there were lavish table arrangements and linens.

Greens MP David Shoebridge said the Fashion Ball's draft budget read more like a Hollywood blockbuster than a fundraiser.

The black-tie event was overseen by an advisory committee of the museum's Centre for Fashion chaired by Lisa Chung, a board member, and included communications consultant Deeta Colvin, and Vogue editor Edwina McCann.

Heavily redacted minutes of committee meetings show the group was keen to have high profile celebrities and influencers attend.

It discussed fundraising options for the night and concluded a pledge was "the best approach" as it was tax deductible and in line with the "the view to have elegant fundraising (not an auction or a raffle)". Ms Colvin was concerned about the quality of the wine and it was recommended that it be tasted.

The fashion ball ended up costing \$388,000 to stage, with the museum required to chip in \$215,209.50. Former director Dolla Merrillees quit in its aftermath.

The fundraiser raised \$78,000 for the Australian Fashion Foundation of which a mere \$1050 was raised from supporters on the night.

At the same time, MAAS's Centre for Fashion itself received more than \$1 million in corporate and individual donations and government grants for "fashion initiatives" between February 2015 and December 2018, documents show.

Mr Shoebridge, deputy chairman of a parliamentary inquiry into the Powerhouse Museum, said the Fashion Ball was an appalling business deal and warranted referral to the NSW Auditor General. "Why did MAAS take all the reputational and financial risk? Why did taxpayers end up paying for the losses?"

That inquiry found last week that the institution had suffered reputation damage as a result of the ball while recommending the government abandon its plans to relocate the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.

But NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian made it clear on Thursday the government would push ahead with the relocation of the Powerhouse. Government sources acknowledged that the management of the event was not in line with government and community expectations and expressed confidence in the new director, Lisa Havilah.

<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/no-expenses-spared-in-powerhouse-fashion-ball-20190302-p5111bz.html>