



Fallout over CA decision continues

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Body

For the first time ever we find ourselves in furious agreement with Sarah Hanson-Young. On Monday the Greens senator called for a "full and frank inquiry" into Creative Australia's decision to withdraw its selection of Khaled Sabsabi as Australia's artist representative to the Venice Biennale 2026.

Many of you will never have heard of Sabsabi, or the Venice Biennale, or Creative Australia, an agency rat-holed in the nether reaches of government and armed with wheelbarrows of taxpayer slush. Yes, some of you might even have thrown your iPads across the room at the temerity of our suggestion that a Greens senator might actually be right about something. Because they never are.

But it's true, there really should be an inquiry into Sabsabi's humiliating board retraction and it should also probe the ideological capture that's hijacked decision-making at Creative Australia.

The agency's CEO, Adrian Collette, will appear before a Senate Estimates hearing next week to talk more about that.

In the meantime, the fallout from this affair keeps expanding. Staff have walked out of Creative Australia offices. Artists have huffed and torn their smocks and signed petitions in protest (which never, ever happens). Lindy Lee resigned from the Creative Australia board despite reiterating her support for Sabsabi to be nixed in her exit letter - a decision in which she participated, after all.

And then there's Simon Mordant, co-chairman of Luminis Partners, who resigned as a biennale ambassador and told The Guardian that he'd pulled a "significant" funding pledge for the project. We hear it was \$40,000, roughly what Simon spends on Cohiba's and Brunello each month at his villa in Italy. His business partner Ron Malek spent the weekend shaking his head in embarrassment at Mordant's unalloyed sanctimony.

"It's outrageous," Mordant wrote of the Sabsabi decision on Instagram. "I have resigned as an Ambassador to the now cancelled project and withdrawn my financial support - this situation is unacceptable. Maybe the Pavilion should remain empty in solidarity with Khaled. A very dark day for Australia and the Arts." Mordant, who is Jewish, hasn't posted any messages of solidarity for Jewish artists who've been doxxed, abandoned and relentlessly

Fallout over CA decision continues

excluded since the October 7 massacres. Not a word from Mordant until Monday when he suddenly sought to clarify his support for Sabsabi - an artist who boycotted the 2022 Sydney Festival because the organisers received \$20,000 of Israeli funding to stage an Israeli choreography display - and posted a whimpering statement saying he would never support an artist "that glorifies terrorism, racism or antisemitism".

"I think everybody has to be very careful about the insidious rise of racism and anti-Semitism which has become particularly prevalent in Australia," Mordant said. Well Simon, when even Sophie McNeill is lavishing you with praise and thanking you for your "leadership", as she did online, it might be time for a walk through the hall of mirrors.

Mikala Tai was the other prominent figure to walk out of Creative Australia "in support of Sabsabi and curator Michael Dagostino", as she wrote on Instagram.

Sabsabi is friendly with Tai. When Creative Australia announced his selection as the Venice Biennale representative, Tai posted a video of them celebrating.

Joining them in that video was Creative Australia program manager Tahmina Maskinyar, who resigned alongside Tai, and whose posts online have included calls for the eradication of Israel ("From the river to the sea ...") and "intifada until victory", which Liberal senator Sarah Henderson called "grossly offensive anti-Semitic content".

Creative Australia said these sentiments didn't breach the agency's code of conduct.

Nothing wrong with a bit of dancing, and nothing wrong with members of Sabsabi's artist group, Eleven Collective, being friendly with Tai. It is a fact, however, that some of these people have sat on Creative Australia panels that adjudicated the provision of taxpayer-funded grants, or been grant recipients themselves.

Like Shireen Taweel, who we mentioned last week - she's affiliated with Tai and received Creative Australia grants of \$45,200 in 2023 and \$32,500 in 2022; Anna Louise Richardson, the wife of artist Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, a panel assessor, received \$31,729 in March 2021; Amrita Hepi received \$35,715 in 2023; and Sabsabi was awarded three grants of \$8500, \$5000 and \$7680 between March 2022 and October 2023 (he also received much larger grants in 2018, 2019 and 2020, prior to Tai taking up work at Creative Australia).

We're not suggesting any of this is evidence of a conflict, nor that Tai had any involvement in furnishing these grants; plus, within Australia's shallow artist pool, decision-making will inevitably involve people who wind up knowing each other.

But wrinkles remain. In the video of Sabsabi dancing, Abdullah left behind a comment that drew our attention: "I love everything about today's announcement. Thank you MT!!!!" It would be telling to discover what role, if any, Tai might have played in the backing of Sabsabi during discussions of the Biennale. One for next week's senate estimates hearing to tease out.

Ongoing process It's been six months since Andrew Forrest's **Fortescue** bowed to the inevitable and wound back the exponential growth of its green energy hiring, sacking as many as 700 staff in the process. But Margin Call hears **Fortescue** staff have been attending a fresh round of leaving parties, as the company again hacks away at its management ranks.

The latest to go is general manager of community and government engagement, Sasha Pandal - a well known figure in Perth business circles, not least for her role on the board of the hapless Fremantle Dockers football club.

Pandal's departure is said to be amicable, but appears part of another round of redundancies among senior managers.

Under the turmoil caused by **Fortescue**'s pivot to green energy, the company somehow managed to insert an entire new level of management - the number of general managers at **Fortescue** blew out from 30-odd a few years ago to as many as 130 in 2024.

Fallout over CA decision continues

The massive cull last year, when **Fortescue** announced it would lay off 700 staff, was supposed to reduce that total to around 40. The process is clearly still ongoing, with a few more departing in recent months, Pandal among them. (Not that all of last year's round of 700 came from **Fortescue** Energy, of course, as the company has been at pains to tell anyone that dares suggest it.) Also departing **Fortescue** this year is the former commercial manager for **Fortescue**'s hydrogen systems unit, Samantha Buchanan, who took a promotion to become a Shell Australia vice-president in January.

Fortescue will deliver its first-half financial results on Thursday, and the company is (again) on a promise to update shareholders on the progress of its energy projects - primarily its Holmaneset green ammonia project in Norway and the Pecem green hydrogen development in Brazil.

Fair to say the going has been getting tougher in Europe, where **Fortescue**'s plans are facing growing public opposition - not least because Holmaneset will draw down about 2 per cent of the total power produced in the country, at a promise of only a small number of jobs.

And as for **Fortescue**'s plans in the US, where it wants to build a hydrogen production plant to fuel trucks? That, like every other renewable energy project in the country, is now prisoner to the new priorities of Donald Trump's "drill, baby drill" administration.

But also in need of a market update is the progress of Forrest's green fundraising arm, **Fortescue** Capital, which, since its 2023 launch under the guidance of Robert Tichio, has built up a leadership group of no less than eight managing directors - all lured away from well-paid gigs at investment banks.

Fortescue Capital was launched with a mandate to attract external investment into the company's green energy arm.

Only **Fortescue**'s board really knows what the gang has been up to since, but Margin Call's quick math suggests **Fortescue** is currently paying 2.7 managing directors for each green energy project that it still hasn't decided to build.

INSIDE MARGIN CALL The big changes continue at Andrew Forrest's **Fortescue**

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