
Man charged with arson over Old Parliament House fire after protests



Old Parliament House's front doors, which date from 1927, were damaged in a fire and protest last week.

By Katina Curtis
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A man will face court on Tuesday charged with arson after the fire at Old Parliament House while experts assess whether it will be possible to repair the damage to the historic building.

Police arrested a 30-year-old Victorian man on Sunday and charged him with arson and damaging Commonwealth property. They have also arrested another four people over the long weekend, on other charges connected with the ongoing protests.

The doors and portico of the historic building, which houses the Museum of Australian Democracy, were damaged in a fire on Thursday during a protest linked to “sovereign citizen” and anti-vaccination figures.

Old Parliament House is expected to be closed for weeks while the clean-up and repair work is done.

Specialist heritage conservators and structural engineers will start a full assessment of the damage on Tuesday and begin to work out whether the area can be repaired, rebuilt or have something else done with it.

Museum director Daryl Karp wasn't sure whether the doors, which are original to the building and date from 1927, would be repairable since "they really are quite charred".



The Old Parliament House doors may not be able to be repaired and the portico will have to be torn down.

But she said the portico had "absolutely been gutted" and would have to come down. It was designed in 1959 and is perhaps best known as the area where Gough Whitlam made his infamous dismissal statement: "Well may we say God save the Queen because nothing will save the Governor-General."

"We've lost some critical parts of our heritage," Ms Karp said.

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"If it wasn't a heritage building, if it didn't have such historical significance, you would just bring in a builder and you'd say, I want it repaired in three weeks, and you'd go for it. But actually, it's far more complicated than that."

She said the question for conservators, particularly if the doors couldn't be restored, would be what to do with them to keep telling the story of their significant heritage and incorporating the contemporary events.



Soot damage in King George's Hall inside Old Parliament House.

The front foyer has sustained water damage, with wooden floors buckled and the walls and roof still lightly covered in soot. The doors are charred on the outside and the glass panes in them are broken.

There is also water damage to the lower floor of the building – which includes the original 1927 linoleum – after the sprinkler system in the front foyer flooded downstairs, and the central King George's Hall and two parliamentary chambers need cleaning from a light coating of soot.

Protesters have been occupying the steps and forecourt of Old Parliament House each morning since mid-December. They had been given permission to hold “smoking ceremonies” in the car park in front of the building, but not on the steps or next to the doors.

Those involved include well-known influencers from the “freedom movement” who oppose vaccine mandates and lockdowns, as well as people claiming to be “sovereign citizens” who believe federal and state governments are invalid. Many have posted footage of the fire and days of protests online.

However, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and traditional Ngambri-Ngunnawal owners from the Canberra region have distanced themselves from the protests, saying the smoking ceremonies were done without their knowledge or consent.

ACT and federal police are working jointly to identify people responsible for the fire and damage to Old Parliament House.

Over the weekend, police charged a 30-year-old Victorian man with arson and damaging Commonwealth property, two other people with assaulting frontline service providers and another with hindering an official.

Footage posted on social media on Monday showed another man being arrested for trespass after he tried to put a shovel-load of smoking coals onto a fire site in front of Old Parliament House.

Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews thanked police for their swift action, saying the right of Australians to protest and voice disagreement with government policies did not extend to alleged criminal behaviour.

“Australian law protects our citizens and their right to protest, but it also protects public and private property,” she said.

“People can have their say, but protest is not an excuse for criminal activity. Anyone found to be engaging in such activity will face the full force of the law.”