

Heliport move reckless, Turnbull tells O'Farrell



Approved sites for the helicopter barge to pass through.

MALCOLM TURNBULL has accused the Premier, Barry O'Farrell, of being "reckless and undemocratic" in allowing a new helicopter service to run unlimited flights from a barge on Sydney Harbour without consulting the community.

The senior federal opposition frontbencher challenged Mr O'Farrell in a series of messages on Twitter, saying the Premier needed "to take charge and rescind" the heliport decision.

"What the government should have done, and I am genuinely astonished that they didn't, is put a submission out and consult the community," Mr Turnbull said, adding that there was "something very, very disquieting about this".



Malcolm Turnbull ... says the Premier needs "to take charge and rescind". *Photo: Alex Ellinghausen*

"You imagine it. Sydney Harbour ... sailing boats full of kids ... helicopters landing on platforms," Mr Turnbull said.

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"Maybe it's all perfectly able to be resolved but wouldn't it be nice to go through a proper process to figure it out?"

Newcastle Helicopters, the company in charge of the heliport, plans to start services next month from four harbour sites after delays arising from residents' demands for consultation. It wants to run up to eight flights an hour from the platform.

After addressing an angry meeting in North Sydney on Monday night, a director of Newcastle Helicopters, James Guest, said he would spend the next few weeks meeting residents in harbourside suburbs.

He said he had commissioned "independent noise studies to get actual data" on how the helicopters would affect those living and working on the harbour.

But Mr Turnbull said such rudimentary checks should have been made before the government approved the heliport.

The Premier did not respond directly to Mr Turnbull but said through a spokesman that he would not be rescinding the heliport licence and he was satisfied with how it had been approved.

Two Liberal MPs whose electorates are near the harbour are unhappy with the process. The Liberal MP for Vacluse, Gabrielle Upton, said the government's lack of consultation was unacceptable and Newcastle Helicopters had promised her it would not begin flights around Shark Island or Rose Bay until it had heard from nearby residents.

A cabinet minister in the O'Farrell government, North Shore MP Jillian Skinner, said she shared her Liberal colleague's concerns. "I would hope that this proposal will run as a trial in its first year and any concerns raised by the community will be addressed", Ms Skinner said.

The outrage about the service has forced the department that approved it to examine its processes for awarding licences. "Roads and Maritime Services is carrying out a review of the aquatic licence approvals process to ensure similar operations include thorough community consultation," a spokeswoman said.

The independent state MP for Sydney, Alex Greenwich, said the government's plan for a floating heliport "questions the respect they have for Sydney Harbour". He called for the government to "scrap the plan immediately".

Sailors are worried, too. Helicopters would be landing in the middle of racing corridors, said Andrew Phillips, the sailing manager at Middle Harbour Yacht Club. "It's caught probably most of us off guard," he said.

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