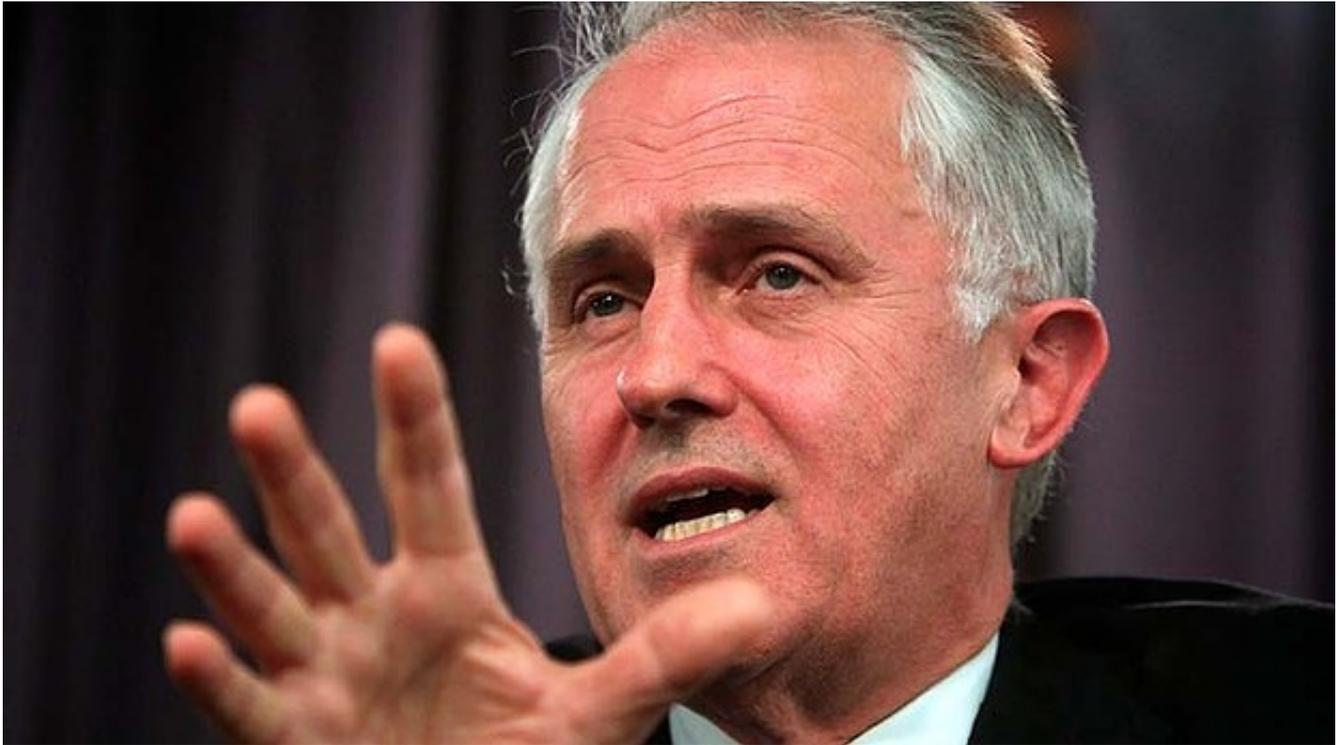


## Floating heliport plan put on hold



Farcical ... 'If you put this into an episode of Yes Minister nobody would believe it,' said Malcolm Turnbull. *Photo: Alex Ellinghausen*

- [Exclusive: Heliport approved without safety check](#)

The controversial Sydney Harbour floating heliport has been put on hold following a storm of criticism over the state government's mishandling of the project.

"Effective immediately, Newcastle Helicopters has put the project of the Sydney Harbour Floating Heliport on hold until further notice, in order to consider the feasibility of the operation going forward," the company in charge of the heliport said through its PR agency on Saturday afternoon.

"It is Newcastle Helicopter's intention to address the relevant concerns and queries with thoroughly considered and accurate information, and is taking the appropriate steps to do so".

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Public anger has been rising for a month since the O'Farrell Government granted Newcastle Helicopters a licence to run unlimited flights from a barge on Sydney Har-

bour. It came to a head this week when federal opposition frontbencher Malcolm Turnbull labelled the project a "reckless" and "undemocratic" disgrace.

The Deputy Premier Andrew Stoner announced the project on November 20, but it soon attracted criticism.

The agency responsible for approving the heliport, Roads and Maritime Services, granted the licence without consulting the community, doing an environmental impact statement, testing for noise or putting the plan out to tender. After an angry community meeting in North Sydney on Monday night, Newcastle Helicopters hastily arranged a noise test on Sydney Harbour to prove that the helicopters were as quiet as they said they would be.

But embarrassingly for the company and for the government, Fairfax Media revealed that the "expert" employed to do the sound tests, Carl Holden of Airport Friendly Solutions, had never previously produced a noise report for helicopters. He also conceded that he had been wrong to describe himself as a member of the Australian Acoustics [sic] Society. The peak body, which is actually called the Australian Acoustical Society, told Fairfax Media Mr Holden has never been a member, although he used to subscribe to its magazine.

The first "noise assessment" report Mr Holden wrote for Newcastle Helicopters, the company planning to operate the heliport, has since been ridiculed by industry leaders and removed from the project's website.

Then on Saturday, Fairfax Media revealed that the government only thought to question the safety of the helicopter service two weeks after it had approved the licence.

At 10am on Saturday about 100 opponents of the heliport met at the McMahons Point Community Centre to hash out their plan to stop the project.

By 11am, motions had been passed, a resolution drafted, and a high-powered group called the Friends of Sydney Harbour had been formed.

They include the federal opposition frontbencher Malcolm Turnbull, celebrated yachtsman and former lone round-the-world sailor, Ian Kiernan, the North Sydney mayor, Jilly Gibson, and many lawyers.

Mr Turnbull said the heliport decision had descended into farce.

"They gave the licence, then they thought, gosh, there might be some aviation safety issues here. Dear me, we might write a letter to CASA [the Civil Aviation Safety Authority] and ask them about it. If you put this into an episode of *Yes Minister* nobody would believe it."

Asked what he thought about the announcement that the heliport was on hold, Mr Turnbull said: "I am not sure what this announcement really means. But our position remains that the government should revoke the licence and if Newcastle Helicopters want to have a floating heliport in the harbour they should make an application that goes through proper planning processes."

The mayor of North Sydney, Jilly Gibson, said: "I commend James Guest and Newcastle Helicopters for listening to the community and responding so quickly."

The Premier, Barry O'Farrell, is still avoiding responsibility for the heliport debacle and deflecting questions to the Deputy Premier's office, even though the licensing agency, Roads and Maritime Services, reports to Roads and Ports minister Duncan Gay. Minister Gay's office is also referring questions to the Deputy Premier.

Mr Stoner said through a spokesperson that "Newcastle Helicopters has advised the NSW Government that the Sydney Harbour Floating Heliport project has been put on hold, pending further discussions with relevant stakeholders".

Newcastle Helicopters could not be reached for comment.

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