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PROOF OF THE WHEELS

Third term conceit is evident in Rita's racetrack which is already bringing the wrong kind of noise

For Jeff Kennett, his political downfall was caused by myopia about big-spending Melbourne projects like Federation Square when people throughout Victoria were doing it tough.

Colin Barnett couldn't shake off the tag of "Emperor" relentlessly applied by his political opponents who discredited him over an expensive promise to bring water to Perth from the north — Colin's canal.

In Queensland, Anna Bligh was cut down as premier for selling off State-owned assets without a mandate, cash-strapped after four terms of Labor rule, leaving it with just seven seats out of 89.

Her successor, Liberal Campbell Newman, won in a landslide but wouldn't listen to anyone and went from hero to zero in three years, losing power in an even-bigger voter backlash.

Which brings us back to WA.

Guess who said this about Labor's street-racing circuit being muscled onto a much loved and well-used riverside parkland reserve at Burswood: "Imagine the noise..."

Hint. It wasn't someone with an established home nearby. Just a tin ear.

And who said that "the roar of V8s" would "take the Burswood Park precinct to a whole new level and ensure the area is a hive of activity throughout the year."

The first quote came from Treasurer Rita Saffioti. The second was Premier Roger Cook.

That was in January, just weeks out from the State election with Labor sure that Supercar racing was a winner on the riverside site. And that spending \$217.5 million on it was a good idea.

This was Saffioti's full quote: "Imagine the noise, atmosphere, and crowds as V8s fly around a new and specially-designed

racetrack in Burswood Park, just a stone's throw away from the city. It'll be incredible."

That's the right word for it. Not credible.

And that's why this ill-conceived project has become a touchstone for any grievance against an increasingly arrogant government's spending priorities.

Rita's racetrack is not what the Government's Burswood Park Board — established in 1985 to manage the 52.9ha nature reserve as part of the casino development — had in mind when it released its 20-year vision in November 2023. The plan proposed "a world-class, cultural, environmental, and recreational showpiece".

A noisy, smelly, street circuit with the visual pollution of infrastructure required for major competitions was a glaring omission. The plan's 10,000-seat amphitheatre for cultural and community concerts has been co-opted and doubled in size by the government as a viewing platform for revheads.

Last weekend, the Cook-Saffioti Government was trying to hose down growing hostility towards the plan, claiming it was a "misconception" that car racing would be frequent, instead of just a once-a-year event.

The problem with that defence is that it raises this question: does it make sense to spend so much money on something used just once in 52 weeks?

The original story was dropped on Sunday Times political editor Joe Spagnolo. This was the second paragraph of his January 12 report, effectively announcing Labor's plan:

"The street circuit would be capable of hosting major national and international motorsports events such as V8 Supercars, Formula E or MotoGP — allowing about 50,000



locals and interstate visitors to turn out each day for a multi-day race event, plus cater for night-time racing under lights."

The Government is now trying to downplay the street circuit as an almost unspoken part of a much leafier, more cultural plan called the "Perth Entertainment and Sporting Precinct".

It's not a "motorsports" venue, as described in Spagnolo's

exclusive, but a project the Government says will deliver "a major hub for community, entertainment, culture, arts, and sport".

The precinct has its own website which promotes "a new outdoor amphitheatre for live music events, a multi-use track and multi-purpose building designed to support cycling, triathlons, running festivals,

paralympic racing, community sports, and a marquee motorsport festival held once a year".

Frankly, that looks like a desperate effort to find other uses for infrastructure designed for car racing. That "multi-purpose building" is actually the pit lane.

And what happened to all the other "major national and



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S ARE FALLING OFF



Premier Roger Cook and Treasurer Rita Saffioti at the racetrack announcement in January. Picture: Michael Wilson

international motorsports events" that Spagnolo reported? He obviously didn't make that up. Someone told him that was the plan.

One racing event a year doesn't make financial sense, which is why no one affected by the development believes the Government's spin.

The questions are endless: how will the Government secure

a racing track, open to the public 51 weeks a year, from hoonos getting onto it every night for their own entertainment?

Why all the secrecy leading up to the January 12 announcement?

For example, Labor Minister Hannah Beazley is the local member, but she appears not to have known about the election promise until the afternoon

before, suggesting it never went to Cabinet.

And why are Cook and Saffioti prepared to wear so much political pain over a car racing circuit that appears to have limited support and replicates one running Supercars at Wanneroo since 1973.

Is there a contractual obligation somewhere the public doesn't know about?

The Burswood project has been under intense scrutiny in State Parliament through what is known as the estimates debate where Ministers and their staff are questioned in detail about Budget allocations.

Attempts to get Saffioti and Paul Papalia — who has responsibility for the Burswood Park Board — to open up about what has been a very opaque government process have been studiously avoided.

While Labor maintains all the land needed for the PESF belongs to the Government, the Opposition believes there is a significant parcel needed for the racetrack which is owned by the casino. That contains two hooks, one financial and one political.

If the land has to be purchased — and it is believed to have been worth about \$60m back in 2013 — then it could blow out the \$217.5m cost. And Saffioti has form in blowouts.

But if it is part of a land swap, it will raise questions about the relationship between the Government and the casino operators, complicated by Papalia's decision in July to approve Crown Perth's gambling licence despite the findings of the 2022 royal commission which found it to be unsuitable.

Landgate searches show there are "current dealings" on one parcel of land despite the Government's denials. This issue was pursued by Opposition Leader Basil Zempilas during Estimates in the Legislative Assembly:

Zempilas: "How can we know whether \$217.5 million will be the final amount if detailed planning is yet to determine whether additional land will need to be acquired from the Crown entertainment complex, I assume, and therefore at a cost?"

Saffioti: "We are very confident that we will not be buying any land. In relation to the amount, that is our estimated total cost from the draft assessment we undertook — our concept plan."

Zempilas: "Could a land swap be in play here?"

Saffioti: "I am not going to go through a hypothetical assessment when we are going through the process of planning this very exciting street circuit project."

That matter will now be explored in detail in the Legislative Council through the

new inquiry into the Government's land transactions set up by the opposition parties and the Greens, thanks to Labor's new electoral laws shifting the numbers.

The inquiry's terms of reference specifically target the Burswood project and the even smellier Smiths Beach development in the South-West. The committee began its operations this week.

In an open letter to all MPs, the Save Burswood Park Alliance, which already has more than 1000 community members, opposed the government's plans on the grounds of financial cost, economic benefit, environmental impact, Indigenous heritage considerations and community impact.

"We are also alarmed by the many due process failures including the absence of a business case, lack of transparency, non-compliance with legislative requirements, failure to genuinely consult with the local community, deviation from published plans (Burswood Park 20 Year Vision) and land tenure issues," alliance chair Robin Harvey wrote.

"In addition, the Government has not been forthcoming about the project's recurrent costs, including the cost of staging each V8 Supercars event and ongoing track and park maintenance. We know from experience there will be hidden costs amounting to tens of millions of dollars every year.

"This extravagance has been thrown into sharp relief with the ongoing public concern about the state of WA's hospitals and the Government's failure to effectively address public and health professionals' concerns. This represents a major policy priority failure."

The theme in the political vignettes at the start of this column was what happens to governments that are too focused on their priorities and don't listen to public unrest.

The Treasurer should realise that the "noise" being generated about her latest wasteful project isn't coming from race cars yet. Imagine that?

It's the sound of a very unhappy public. She can't hear it because she's not listening.

Rita's racetrack is an endless gift to Labor's political opponents. Incredible.