

JESSICA PAGE

Buzzwords obscure reality

Labor's failures on housing & health can't be disguised by trendy catchphrases



Rita Saffioti's speech is still being finalised, but there are some well-rehearsed lines that should be included in the Budget bingo card for those keeping score. Keeping WA moving will be the Government's theme.

Housing supply will be the centrepiece. "It's all about supply, supply, supply," has been the answer whenever there are questions about rising mortgages and rents.

Delivery should be on the bingo card, too. That is the real test for the Treasurer and on that score the Opposition has been busy practising its own line of attack.

"The people of Western Australia are sick of seeing this State Government patting themselves on the back without any delivery to show for it," Basil Zempilas said on Sunday. "They want to see results."

Because on housing — and health — Labor talked the talk but under-cooked the repair job last year.

Tinkering at the thresholds of stamp duty concessions was quickly outdone by surging prices.

Construction targets were a case of close but no cigar as completion rates lagged.

The post-election Budget buzz phrase in 2025 was "economic infrastructure" — poles and wires weren't sexy but they were important, Saffioti said.

Labor had to get a move on the groundwork to have any hope of reaching its 2030 deadline for coal and Roger Cook's vaunted green energy transition. The energy transition is a slow burn.

But health and housing need a quicker fix.

The writing was on the wall on both issues before and during last year's election but

the Opposition's low numbers and infighting shielded Labor at the ballot box.

Since then it has been harder to gloss over.

Health demanded a better solution and got a \$1.5 billion Building Hospitals Fund (now \$2b) in November.

This week, it's housing's turn and the Government's been busy putting taxpayers' money where its mouth is.

Already there has been \$692 million for "seven cities" in regional WA, \$1b for enabling infrastructure to build 34,000 homes and more Keystart support for first-homebuyers — as the bank of Roger and Rita picks up the slack from the bank of mum and dad that can't keep up with surging prices. Rent reform tipping the power

balance from landlords to tenants was announced on Monday, plus a \$13.5m extension to financial support for those in rental stress. And Cook says there's still a few surprises up Rita's rolled-up sleeves.

"There's always surprises on Budget day," he said.

It's the follow through after May 7 that will shape the political battle in WA for 2027 and beyond.

Labor's ad nauseam repeat of "jobs, health and housing" as its priorities have set a clear standard.

The Zempilas-led Opposition's attacks will lose momentum if those announcements do finally become reality.

The Liberals' plan B strategy is "sensible" spending, though

that's trickier. A healthy surplus can dull the calls for Budget restraint in WA versus Canberra, as it did on Tuesday when the Premier demanded to know what Zempilas would hypothetically cut.

But that won't wash if controversial project costs blow out. Labor has its excuse ready, that was worn out by Metronet and COVID's impact on supply chains — "global uncertainty".

Expect that phrase to get a workout on Thursday, too.

But despite war raging in Iran impacting fuel bowlers here, that excuse won't fully absolve the Treasurer.

Especially if the Perth Park and its racetrack exceed \$217m, while hospitals and housing targets remain a work in progress. Because these crises pre-date the Iran war.

"This is not quick in the coming," Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre director Alan Duncan said.

He's described a "perfect storm" of population growth and supply constraints that have eroded production capacity on housing.

"Housing should be absolutely No.1 priority, because therein lies a solution to a bunch of other cost-of-living pressures that people are facing," Professor Duncan said.

Rome wasn't built in a day. But in WA in 2026, it's all about delivery. Expect to see plenty of ministers armed with hard hats and shovels, trying to dig the Government out of a population-driven hole.

This economy's competing challenges of supply and inflation will demand they get their hands dirty to ensure the job gets done.

And the Budget's buzzwords will need to be seen to be believed.



Picture: Ian Carnegie

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