

JESSICA PAGE

Can Cook up ante in 2026?

Post-election years can be the toughest on leaders. The Premier is going all-in



On a hot summer's evenin' on a Metronet bound for Ellenbrook, I met up with an imaginary gambler ... Elections defined politics in WA in 2025 but the new year will be more unpredictable, and a risk for Roger Cook and Rita Saffioti.

The post-election year often is. History shows it's the grunt year for political leaders, with fewer ribbons to cut and sods to turn but more fires that need putting out.

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, when to walk away and when to run.

As Kenny Rogers said of life: you never count your money when you're sitting at the table.

But the Cook Government has gone all-in on a few bets that will shape 2026.

Perth Park

They changed the name, but Labor has dug in on the controversial plan to build a street circuit (and amphitheatre) in Burswood.

The ACIL Allen business case into the \$217.5 million project was referred to Infrastructure WA for assessment in November but the Government is determined to start construction as soon as possible.

There are a few within Cabinet and the backbench who want it dumped but the majority are holding their noses as the Premier and Deputy Premier remain convinced that the sooner it's finished the sooner Perth will learn to love it.

But until it's done, this project will be the thorn in Labor's side.

The Opposition is betting it will go over budget, and that voters will remember

the cost even after the chequered flag signals that the race is over.

Winter ED surge

Reeling from three consecutive months of record ambulance ramping and revelations a winter surge plan for 2025 was only finalised three days before the season started, the Government needs hospitals to cope better in winter 2026.

In Parliament in November, the Health Minister said that a final plan for the coming winter would be released publicly by February.

In October, Meredith Hammat accused the Opposition of crying "crocodile tears" about the health system.



"We have a proud record in health. We have made significant investments. There are more than 900 new beds in our system since 2021," she said.

"They come in and run their cheap criticisms without any recognition about the context in which we are operating ... we are experiencing the worst flu season on record."

That's now the yardstick that 2026 will be compared to.

New hospitals won't be ready yet but the purchase of the St John of God Hospital in Mt Lawley should add about 100 beds into the public hospital system.

Will that be enough?

GST fight

WA's balance sheet, and Rita Saffioti's financial management, depend on the 2018 GST deal that guarantees every State at least 75¢ back for every dollar the tax raised.

The Productivity Commission's review of those GST distribution reforms is due to be handed to the Federal Government by December 31, 2026.

The WA Treasurer will argue her case in public every chance she gets but there's a big catch.

In a non-election year, without WA seats on the

line for Albanese and Chalmers, it's the fraught negotiations behind closed doors that could decide it.

That's why Ms Saffioti is leaning on WA's business bigwigs to do some of the heavy lifting.

Federal Labor might not need WA votes but Jim Chalmers still needs the State's mining money.

Green iron

Iron ore remains a safe bet for WA. Even if the price falls, it's unlikely to fall as low as the US\$72 per tonne the Budget forecasts.

But Roger Cook's ambitious plan for locally made green steel to be embedded in infrastructure projects is a long shot.

The Premier has identified the Kwinana Neo-Smelt pilot plant as one project he'll fast-track using new State development powers.

The joint venture partners — BlueScope, BHP and Rio Tinto — are due to make a final investment decision midyear.

Hopefully by then one of them will be able to answer the lingering question: how low do emissions need to go for it to be called green steel?

New Year's resolution

Roger Cook doesn't need a New Year's resolution but the jury is out on whether he's delivered on the second half of the current one.

Ahead of January 1, 2025, the Premier said: "my focus will be to build on our economic success so all Western Australians can benefit".

Somewhere in the darkness, the gambler, he broke even.

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