

Racetrack plan could crash

BRIAN BURKE



This Government is developing a tin ear. And a tin ear in politics is like a ruptured cruciate ligament in football. Season ending.

Deputy Premier Rita Saffioti appears to be the ringmaster when it comes to bread and circuses and veteran political observers have had niggling doubts about our Treasurer's political judgment for some time now.

When Keating the Musical played Perth some years ago, Saffioti sat near colleague Norm Marlborough who was surprised to be asked: "Who's Gareth Evans?"

Then, when premier Alan Carpenter pondered calling an early election only to see the Liberal Party switch leaders from Troy Buswell to Colin Barnett, it was Saffioti who advised Carpenter to go ahead. And we all know how that worked out.

Using taxpayers' money to pay Coldplay — with ticket prices up to \$260 — to play Perth was an ominous indication of the priorities of our Treasurer.

Next came the millions paid to partner World Wrestling Entertainment and the Ultimate Fighting Championship to come to Perth next month.

WWE's vaudevillian troupe of actors will host multiple events here including Smackdown.

If the bulging muscles at WWE's Smackdown don't divert you, \$60m is being paid to relocate a failed New South Wales rugby league team to Perth.

Now, if listening to Coldplay, watching highly paid actors grapple in the ring or trying to get interested in rugby league isn't your thing, there'll soon be the chance to see Supercars hurtle round a racetrack that no one wants



Illustration: Don Lindsay

Massive majorities can melt in an electorate no longer rusted on in tribal loyalty.

and was never part of the plan to develop Burswood into Perth's gateway.

The cost today is \$217m but it's sure to blow out while we wait with bated breath to learn the cost of the present plan to attract an Italian soccer team to Perth.

All of that is grist to the political mill but there are fundamental, more important questions to be answered in the context of an increasingly alarming deterioration in our health and hospital systems, housing in crisis and escalating cost-of-living pressures. Not to mention a looming energy crunch.

Why is the Government so single-minded in its pursuit of the Burswood racetrack?

There's certainly no political mileage in it — no one lobbied for it and it's hard to find anyone who wants it while there's no shortage of critics asking if there's a hidden commitment we've not been told about.

Is this the reason the go ahead was announced while community consultation was unfinished; why there's been no satisfactory explanation about the tendering process that saw the unexpected announcement of the group chosen to design

and build the racetrack and, importantly, unanswered questions about the cost of the land for the track.

Remember, Crown paid \$60m to the government for land to expand its resort and now appears to be returning part of that parcel for nothing.

Coincidentally, the casino's licence was renewed after an inquiry that was, to put it mildly, sharply critical.

If government is about more than simply addressing the problems that arise each day, then there's the need for the courage to argue, educate and persuade the electorate to achieve the vision that courage underpins.

At Burswood, that means ditching the unpopular unnecessary raceway, shifting Belmont Racetrack to Lark Hill and developing Burswood as was originally intended for all

West Australians.

Now, I'm the man who rescued Rothwells so, while that disqualifies me in some circles from commenting on government relations with business, it also establishes the credentials that allow me to say there's something not quite right here.

Importantly, voters like to know their political representatives are listening — not talking over them and not dismissing them out of hand.

Politics is so much more volatile in the 21st century that massive majorities can melt in an electorate no longer rusted on in tribal loyalty.

That's when having a tin ear becomes a very costly political problem.

Brian Burke is a former Labor premier of WA