



Labor can't afford Treasurer to be shaken & stirred like she was

Saffioti's big problem: she hates Basil



Liberal Party leader Basil Zempilas is getting under the skin of Labor's star Rita Saffioti, pictured facing page.
Pictures: Justin Benson-Cooper

Rita Saffioti has a problem. And this one is not her enthusiastic overspending as a Minister or an inability as Treasurer to pull her own fiscal profligacy into line.

As bad as that might be for a government dependent on iron ore and GST revenues — but with the good times rapidly coming to an end — that's not her biggest political problem.

It's Basil — Basil Zempilas. The Opposition Leader appears to have invaded a particularly sensitive part of Saffioti's brain where he is living rent-free and having the time of his life. The stink over Labor's \$217.5 million Burswood racetrack project that very few seem to want is bringing out the worst of it. Zempilas is, admittedly, a polarising figure.

The likeable Telethon host and father of three fights an internal battle royal against the raffish football caller and talkback radio host with a voice that his detractors find like chalk on a blackboard.

Now he's taken that attention-grabbing duality into politics. And Saffioti appears obsessively polarised about him. She hates his guts and doesn't seem to care who knows it. Which is great for Zempilas.

Because Saffioti is the one person in the Cook Labor Government that the Liberals would want to have off her game and acting like she's mad as a hatter.

People who read her weekly 10 points in The West get a taste of her views. But most don't see what she says about Zempilas

in the Parliament and how agitated she is by his very presence there.

Back in July, Saffioti had to appear as the Minister for Transport for a line-by-line grilling of the Budget provisions for Main Roads before what is known as the estimates committee.

Saffioti's response to an anodyne question from Zempilas jumped off the page when I was researching Hansard transcripts for an August column on the Burswood controversy.

Zempilas asked about the road surfacing needed for a racetrack and Saffioti spat back at him across the chamber: "This is not about you, mate." Out of nowhere.

I remember thinking: Wow, he really gets under her skin. She needs to watch that.

The second half of the August column focused on a looming issue for the Government around a parcel of land within the Burswood project area that it does not own. I noted the politics were potentially bad for Labor.

The Government's insistent line was that it had all the land it needed for the so-called Perth Entertainment and Sporting Precinct — colloquially known as Rita's Racetrack — and was not budging.

It's taken nearly three months but the truth is now emerging that it does not own a 4ha parcel of land right on the southern hairpin of its racetrack, close to the Crown Towers swimming pools.

When a TV reporter approached Saffioti's office for comment last week, the

statement he was issued shows the Treasurer's sullen antipathy to Zempilas.

It was extraordinarily attributed to "a Government spokesperson" rather than Saffioti taking ownership of what was an ad hominem attack. This is the response in full, with my comments in parentheses:

"The project area includes land between Optus Stadium and Crown Towers, with an overwhelming majority of land owned by the State Government."

(Importantly, this was the first admission by the Government that it did not own all the land it needed, hidden in the "overwhelming majority" line.)

"A portion of the southern end of the former golf course site was sold to Crown by former Liberal premier Colin Barnett in 2013. As part of that Barnett government deal, the land in question required development to start in 2020, which has not occurred, and be completed by 2028."

(However, some fine detail from the 2020 Victorian royal commission into Crown's casino suggests that clause allows the State to buy back the \$60m land parcel — not get it free.)

"The State Government is working through those details, depending on the final design of the project. Detailed design work commenced in July following the consultation process and is expected to be finalised in coming weeks."

(The August 30 column noted some political hooks if that land needed to be bought back.