

Scandal in Tasmania: The Edifice Sports Complex Runs Amok

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Profligate, a betrayal of public service, a misspending of state goods, a fiscal barbarism. By any estimation, recent efforts regarding sport in the small Australian state of Tasmania, unmoored from the mainland, distant, and, in many ways, depressed, has become the unexpected centre of a debate: Why on earth should the public purse at both State and Federal level fork out hundreds of millions in dollar currency for a stadium for Australian Football's newest recruit? There are, let's face it, other handy alternatives.

Historically, Australian sport has been bosom-tied to corrupt administrative and state management. Administrators of the myriad sporting codes are typically conceited in assuming they provide a service for an increasingly obese populace. The sports personalities turn up and play; spectators turn up in their colours, pies and beers; the sporting hierarchs can then claim they are doing society a service. The logical equation that follows from this is revenue raising for the facilities – as long as the sporting body is not the one doing it.

What is being proposed in Tasmania, a state suffering from chronic homelessness, chronic indigence and desperation on the health front, is a carbuncle stadium on a waterfront at Macquarie Point, a project that promises to cost \$715 million. Those attending it will not be doing so for an aesthetic appreciation of the view: they will be in the enclosed stadium itself, watching the gladiatorial performance. All of this is deemed necessary for Tasmania's imminent welcome into the fold of the Australian Football League (AFL).

The jaundiced view from the Tasmanian Liberal government, led by Premier Jeremy Rockliff, is that having a spanking new stadium to accommodate a spanking new team at Macquarie Point is just the ticket. The suggested price tag of contribution from his government: \$375 million.

In an exercise of indulgent and shameless deception, Rockliff, as the AFL's Manchurian Candidate, [has dressed the entire enterprise](#) up as an "urban renewable project like no

other that has ever been seen here in Tasmania". Entertainment, he dreams, will be coupled with the unlocking of "potential, where we can build a world-class multipurpose entertainment and sporting where all Tasmanians can enjoy".

From the Commonwealth, \$240 million is promised in what Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [is calling](#) an "exciting project", in addition to \$65 million towards upgrading the UTAS Stadium in Launceston. Albanese has been busy fluffing up matters by claiming that this whole act of profligacy had less to do with football than a grand exercise in social redevelopment, an exercise of structural oxygenation that will produce (no modelling, evidence or otherwise is supplied) 4,200 jobs.

Attempts have been made to smooth the scandalous offer of Commonwealth funds [by suggesting](#) possible remediation work and housing for low-paid workers, such as nurses, within the precinct. "It should be seen not as a site for a potential footy stadium, but as a site for urban redevelopment that will enhance the city of Hobart and make it even better in the future, that will enhance economic activities."

This frightful, pitiable nonsense is a persistent theme in sports propaganda, stretching back to the Olympics. Build monstrous stadia; host a tournament; and lay waste to whole stretches of the urban scape. Huge bills are justified by futuristic tallying and soothsaying accounting.

Hence we have Albanese saying that "we need to look at housing we need to look at the way that the beautiful foreshore at the Derwent operates." Sporting facilities do not build homes, ameliorate the condition of the poor, nor improve health, but the Australian prime minister is irritatingly game to suggest otherwise.

The AFL is proving the most miserly in the whole show, offering a Scrooge-counted \$15 million towards this edifice complex. And they are only doing so subject to blackmail. The sporting organisation's outgoing boss, Gillon McLachlan, is doing every little bit to conceal the fact, [stating](#) on May 3 that the admission of Tasmania to the footy fraternity was "the result of nearly 150 years of football passion by Tasmania and their proud and passionate football community... and frankly decades of advocacy." But do give us your wallets, please.

The opposition has been formidable, rounded, and biting. They start with the Labor opposition in Tasmania itself, somewhat perplexed by the Federal government's money throwing exercise. The federal Liberals are none too keen either. Then come the vocal Tasmanian independents, Andrew Wilkie and Jacqui Lambie.

As Wilkie [notes](#), two stadia of some quality - UTAS Stadium and Blundstone Arena - already exist. But most worrying to him were the 4,500 people on the housing waiting list in "the least affordable rental market in the country, a health and aged care system on the brink of collapse, chronic underfunding of education and crushing traffic congestion."

The literature on stadia being eventually self-financing, even profitable, is not positive. In the United States, a large school of sceptical thought on the positive returns of public investment in sport has developed. It has sought to upend the usual assumption: the role of subsidies, which supposedly can be offset by good revenues from ticket receipts. Then come other fictions, including the idea that other expenditures and returns that are meant to take place in the economy outside the stadium itself.

Writing in the 1990s, Roger Noll and Andre Zimbalist did much to rain on the parade of the stadia building enthusiasts. Their [analysis](#) on the poor returns from public investment in sport stadia was pertinently devastating and, it followed, assiduously ignored. "A new sports facility has an extremely small (perhaps even negative) effect on overall economic activity and employment. No recent facility appears to have earned anything approaching a reasonable return on investment. No recent facility has been self-financing in terms of its impact on net tax revenues."

Sport is Australia's social lubricant and diffuser, run by a thuggish fraternity (and sisterhood) keen on ensuring that they will have a guaranteed source of income at a moment's sneeze. It serves to distract and soften. At the core of it is a complex of suited boardroom representatives keen to provoke, tease and scold the public and its elected representatives, all in the name of receiving the funds they should be raising from private sources.

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