



If you build it, the voters will come

The Labor government ought to address its dismal record with regards to important sporting events

MICHAEL OWEN

WHEN voters are asked in 2014 if they want to give the 12-year-old Labor government another term of office, grand statements about economic intangibles alone won't be enough to woo them.

Bread and circuses also will be a factor for Labor to retain power in South Australia.

This is why the government is reeling from this week's loss of the International Rugby Sevens tournament to the Gold Coast. For a long-term administration addicted to trumpeting what it has done to make SA a vibrant tourist destination, its record on attracting and keeping big sporting events is frightful.

Premier Mike Rann in particular doesn't have a good track record. In 1993, Rann was tourism minister in the dying days of the previous Labor government when the bombshell dropped that Melbourne was pinching Adelaide's much-loved Formula One Grand Prix. The race had put Adelaide on the map as a happening place to visit and the state has never fully recovered psychologically from losing it.

Fast forward to 2002, when Labor under Rann regained power, and the Tour Down Under cycling race and the Clipsal 500 V8 carnival were entering their fourth years.

As initiatives of the former Liberal government, the events aimed to replace the grand prix and have gone from strength to strength to



become important events. But now Victoria is circling again, threatening to poach the events from under state Labor's watch.

There are already a swag of events that have been lost during the Rann government years.

The Jacob's Creek Golf Open Championship went in 2007. Horse racing at Victoria Park was abandoned in 2008, all because Rann backed his friend, then tourism minister Jane Lomax-Smith, who fretted that building a permanent grandstand would upset a vocal minority in her seat of Adelaide. Last year she lost the seat anyway after a hefty swing at the state election.

Then there is the embarrassment of the government's failed deal with the Cronulla Sharks rugby league team. In 2008 the Sharks had a deal with the state government to play one NRL game at Hindmarsh Stadium each year for the next three years, starting from 2009.

The Sharks were released from this contract after just one year.

SA also has recently lost the rights to Soccerroos matches against Serbia and Chile.

And who can forget the tennis? The Australian Men's Hardcourt

comes to winning elections.

After this week's loss of the rugby sevens, the spotlight now shines even brighter on the proposed redevelopment of Adelaide Oval, a project that will see AFL return to the city centre for the first time since the early 1970s.

Come March 2014, whether it's Rau or Rann or someone else (think Jack Snelling or Jay Weatherill) leading Labor, that redevelopment will have to be complete and a full schedule of AFL games locked in for the year ahead if Labor is to have a chance of a fourth term.

tournament, one of the world's oldest and the launching pad for Lleyton Hewitt's stellar career, moved to Brisbane in 2009 after 126 years in Adelaide.

The government now crows about the \$100 million it has spent on a new swimming centre, opened with much fanfare by Rann last week. It is a magnificent facility, but why did nobody bother to bid for the World Junior Water Polo Championships, which have been secured by Perth?

Inquirer understands SA was invited to bid for the event (involving 36 teams from 20 countries) but simply failed to do so. It is another sporting embarrassment for the government.

Tourism Minister John Rau was left red-faced on ABC local radio this week when asked by presenter Matt Abraham to name one important international sporting event the Labor government, during almost a decade in power, had attracted to the state. A past tense, "we had the tennis", was the best he could offer. As Rann's deputy and the man in line to be the next premier, one assumes Rau understands the importance of bread and circuses when it

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That's the real story of the Adelaide Oval issue. The government is counting on its \$535m contribution to the redevelopment to buy it another term in office.

A go-ahead is subject to a 75 per cent vote in favour by South Australian Cricket Association members due to be taken on May 2.

South Australia's "can-do" Infrastructure Minister Pat Conlon will have builders in place and ready to roll within weeks if the SACA members vote yes.

Conlon has already stated that turning the picturesque, village-style cricket oval into a world-

class, multi-purpose stadium is the government's top priority.

The expectation is that a flood of interstate sporting tourists will join local sports lovers — all of them now feeling good about their city again — in the new grandstands.

But live television coverage and the perception of a second-class stadium at suburban West Lakes has hurt attendances at AFL matches in South Australia and seen membership numbers for the Adelaide Crows and Port Power clubs dive.

When cheap plasma TVs and

new Blu-ray DVD technology threatened to kill the motion picture industry, cinemas were radically redesigned to provide a 21st-century experience and get people out of their lounge rooms. It worked, even if some beautiful old cinemas fell by the wayside.

The same can be said for Adelaide Oval, but voters should understand that this is really all about a government trying to revive a tired brand.

Like the man said, give them bread and circuses.



MICHAEL MARSCHALL

Sport Minister Tom Kenyon and Premier Mike Rann at the State Aquatic Centre in Marion