

The Tasmanian Liberal government is in crisis and a snap election likely to be called as the premier clings to plans for a stadium that will bankrupt the state.

The island of white elephants

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Kerry Packer, who sold the Nine Network to Alan Bond for \$1 billion only to buy it back for \$250 million, famously remarked that you only get one Alan Bond in your life. Gil McLachlan must have felt something similar on meeting Tasmanian Liberal premier Jeremy Rockliff.

Without cabinet, treasury or parliamentary backing, Rockliff, a potato farmer from North West Tasmania, agreed to then AFL boss McLachlan’s demand that the price Tasmania had to pay for its own AFL team was a new stadium built in the middle of Hobart, at taxpayers’ expense, a condition that has never been made of any other state entering the competition. The AFL – those same geniuses who gave the world AFLX – rammed the point home in a slogan: “No stadium, no team”.

Rockliff, the Elmer Fudd of Tasmanian politics, was not so much a character in search of an author as a politician in search of an idea, and with the AFL stadium he found it. As it slowly but inevitably dragged him to his political death on Thursday, when the Tasmanian parliament passed a vote of no-confidence in him, he waxed ever more lyrical about its potential to transform Tasmania. In his telling, the stadium became a cross between the Sydney Opera House, the Louvre and Disneyland that would propel Tasmania into the 21st century.

The idea though was a terrible one: the AFL callously insisted it go in the heart of historic Hobart, the worst act of civic vandalism since Sydney’s Cahill Expressway, and, as it quickly became clear, hugely costly for a near bankrupt Tasmanian state government. The popular rage against the stadium was apparent from when the stadium proposal was kickstarted into life by the AFL awarding Tasmania an AFL team licence in 2023, with a hastily convened rally days later protesting against it attracting as many attendees as the visiting AFL game at Hobart’s Bellerive Oval.

It was only downhill from there. Liberal parliamentarians went to the cross bench rather than support the stadium; Rockliff went to an early election in March 2024, in which he promptly lost his majority over the stadium. A cross bench larger than the Labor Party was returned, and all bar one are opposed to the stadium. No less than the Liberals’ own election strategist, Brad Stansfield, went on record to say Labor would have won outright if they had taken a “clear, strong position against it”. Through all this, the AFL supported Rockliff as a noose supports a condemned man.

By the time of this year’s federal election, rage against the Rockliff government’s stadium plans was so pronounced that in the last week of the campaign the federal Liberals contemplated coming out against their own state party in opposition to it.

By 2025, the stadium, projected in 2019 to cost \$300 million, would, according to the government’s own planning commission, now cost \$1.86 billion over 10 years, will return at best 53 cents in the dollar, and will likely lead to a credit downgrade. It is to be built by a government so incompetent it forgot to build

new berthing facilities for two new Bass Strait ferries.

What in richer states would merely be a bureaucratic embarrassment, in tiny Tasmania threatens fiscal catastrophe. Western Australia has individuals worth triple Australia’s smallest and poorest state’s annual budget: just \$9.4 billion. Worse, Tasmania’s total debt is projected to blow out by 2027-28 to a staggering \$19.9 billion – more than double Tasmania’s annual budget.

With the worst public health system in the nation and a public education system that delivers a 50 per cent illiteracy rate, to say nothing of growing homelessness, you might think that Jeremy Rockliff, facing a spiralling public debt crisis, would have wanted to devote what scant moneys the island has spare to address these pressing issues and seek to renegotiate his contract with the AFL.

Yet like a latter-day Captain Ahab willing to sink his ship pursuing his white whale of a stadium, as the crisis worsened daily because of his ever more desperate attempts to balance a collapsing budget with an ever more expensive stadium, his government began a series of austerity budgets. Around 2500 public servants are to be sacked and there is to be a fire sale of major government businesses and assets. It is also likely, as Saul Eslake recommended to the government last year as a way to pay down Tasmania’s burgeoning debt, that there will be increased taxes.

The AFL demanded its roofed stadium be built at Macquarie Point, its vast scale and bulk overwhelming Hobart’s historic cityscape, directly behind the beloved Old Wharf buildings on Sullivans Cove. This is like demanding a new stadium in the middle of Sydney’s Rocks. Worse, the backside of the stadium is jammed up against Hobart’s impressive Cenotaph, where it will dominate what is Hobart’s finest public space and to many a sacred site. It’s an act of desecration akin to putting Marvel Stadium cheek by jowl next to Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance. Would the AFL find it inexplicable if Victorians thought that was a bad idea?

That the RSL is outraged and that the AFL doesn’t care less are both unsurprising. Nor did the AFL – the same AFL that claims to be so concerned about Indigenous Australia – care for a moment that its stadium would be built over the site of what was to have been the first Indigenous memorial park in Australia dedicated to those who died in the frontier wars – a park conceived and driven by Palawa people that had widespread community support in Tasmania.

The AFL’s arrogance towards Tasmania, its lack of understanding of the impact of what it is demanding, its lack of care about the extraordinary costs the stadium will impose on an impoverished society, has deeply angered most Tasmanians, many of whom attribute the collapse of Aussie rules over the last quarter century as the island’s most popular grassroots sport to the AFL’s mismanagement.

Amazingly, the stadium, an unaffordable idea in the wrong place, will see just seven games of AFL played there a year. Cricket bodies say they can’t play there because of the roof the AFL insists upon, and, despite much relentless government boosting, it’s deemed highly unlikely by concert promoters to bring in any significant stadium acts.

While most Tasmanians support an AFL



A digital rendering of the proposed Macquarie Point Stadium in Hobart. Supplied

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team, they don’t understand why the AFL insists on Tasmania bankrupting itself to build a white elephant. Whenever polled, between 56 and 60 per cent of Tasmanians oppose the stadium and that number swells to 70 per cent when Tasmanians are asked if they support a stadium costing more than the government’s now abandoned spending cap of \$375 million.

Because the stadium would break *all* heritage planning rules, the government made the stadium a project of state significance, having its own planning commission assess it. In March, the planning commission published a scathing interim report that found the stadium was a disastrous proposition in almost every way: location, heritage, cost, transport, cityscape. They found it was even unsafe to evacuate.

Jeremy Rockliff responded by announcing he would ditch his own planning processes and instead ram the proposal through parliament this month, declaring that even if his approval rating “went down to 10 per cent” he would still back the stadium.

Because of the stadium’s extraordinary failings, the government’s fast-track legislation, driven by Liberal minister Eric Abetz, exempts the stadium build from all common law rights of appeal. That means the stadium, no matter what problems arise, will be built outside the rule of law. Greg Barns, SC, of the Australian Lawyers Alliance, has likened it to the act of an authoritarian government, calling it “dangerous” to democracy and likely to be challenged in a higher court.

All this highlights why the AFL’s insistence on a stadium has led the majority of Tasmanians to view it as bullying blackmail, with 59 per cent of Tasmanians believing the AFL has treated Tasmania unfairly.

Jeremy Rockliff’s fall does not spell the end of the stadium, and it seems as if the AFL now controls the destiny of Tasmania’s future rather than Tasmanians. The Liberals still support the stadium and so, too, inexplicably, does the Labor Party, both in clear defiance of the longstanding majority opposition to it in the community and the disastrous effects it will have on Tasmania’s future.

Rockcliff has said he will ask for a snap election next week, the second about the stadium, yet no one expects the Liberals to do anything but worse. Labor, which has managed to lift its vote above 29 per cent only once since 2014 and then only just, is equally unlikely to do better and will probably also fare badly, with the only likely beneficiaries an ever-growing cross bench. What government results it is impossible to predict, but the stadium will continue to haunt it. In Tasmania, an island of white elephants, where reality was never made by realists, the implausible frequently becomes possible and the stadium, precisely because it is a lunacy that demands passionate belief from its high priests, may yet be built.

In the absence of anyone in the Tasmanian government with the guts to tell the AFL that Tasmania cannot afford this stadium, it will be left to the Tasmanian people to fight for their future. It is folly to think, as the AFL does, that Tasmania is like South Australia, that come the stadium come popular support, as it did with the Adelaide Oval redevelopment. Should the stadium pass parliament, stadium opposition groups have flagged a campaign of civil disobedience in an island with a long, proud and successful history of mass direct action. History tends to go only one way in such campaigns in Tasmania – from the Franklin to pulp mills to gay law reform – and it may not be the AFL that wins.

AFL chief executive Andrew Dillon will then need to answer to the Australian public for the cruelty of the AFL stadium demand and the questions raised by ongoing images of homeless people chained to machinery on the stadium construction site, as well as the inevitable arrests and prosecutions of nurses, emergency workers and RSL veterans. To say nothing of a popular new club with 210,000 members he is consigning to history before its first game.

There is an alternative. The AFL could let the Devils play at the two existing stadiums that have been successfully used for AFL games over the past two decades and on which hundreds of millions of dollars have already been spent.

What would remain is the most generous state support of any sporting team in Australian history. Separate of the stadium, Tasmania is pouring an astonishing *quarter of a billion dollars* of taxpayers’ money into the Devils – \$12 million a year for 12 years from 2023, a total of \$144 million, plus a high performance centre that, even before turning a single sod, has already blown out to \$105 million. That’s on top of \$114 million Tasmanian taxpayers have spent subsidising the AFL since 2007 – not footy, but the Hawks, Roos and associated infrastructure.

The AFL would do well not to push their luck with a near-broke state of less than 600,000 people, or Tasmanians without homes or missing out on healthcare might begin asking why so much of what little money Tasmania has should continue subsidising the richest entertainment corporation in Australia, the greed of which is so great you have to pay to watch its game on Saturday.

Despite the recent, patronising cant of Eddie McGuire on *Footy Classified*, claiming that if you give Tasmanians gold bars they’ll throw them back in your face, if you give people dog turds that’s exactly what the AFL can now expect to be smeared with, unless it changes course – and soon. ●