

## Questions fester about the state government's new aquatic centre news (Saturday media announcement: 10 June 2023)

John Bridgland\*

The state Labor government's timing of its media event (the middle of a June long weekend) has underscored its media minders' anxiety about progress of this proposed Adelaide park lands development.

### 9 questions the state government hopes you won't ask

1. Why has the state government's 'announce and defend' project suddenly "blown out" from \$82.4m pre-2022-election to \$135m? *[Before March 2022 Labor tested a risky, new, pre-March-2022-poll technique by announcing that if it won the election, a park lands aquatic centre site would automatically cease to be a city council matter, even though the existing \$21m asset is owned and run by the council on council-tenured park lands. This was a new political-planning template, effectively a state takeover of a park lands site, sold to voters as a 'Malinauskas-bearing-gifts' bid. Moreover, Labor never did explain at the time why this project was costed precisely at \$82.4m, and, 16 months later, the 10 June 2023 media event has thrown no fresh light on that fact. Moreover, Labor won't now explain the reasons why the cost has increased by \$53m to \$135m, at a time when the state budget faces the prospect of much red ink. The SA public smells a rat.]*
2. Why has the state government never tabled the explicit 2022 \$82.4m aquatic centre concept plan or master plan (despite state media release pledges in 2022 to do so) and why won't the Premier or Adelaide MP, Lucy Hood, publicly table a comparison between the plan sketches and the new 10 June 2023 concept sketches?<sup>1</sup> *[The project is now obviously to be much larger and will have not only a larger footprint compared to the original sketches but also, being a new multi-storey built form, a much larger total floor space area than the existing swim centre (which is single storey). The comparison is critical, because very clearly something major has recently changed that the state government seeks to shroud in layers of June 2023 spin. A clue is future commercial club and administrative use allowances.<sup>2</sup>]*
3. Why is the state government pretending to be deaf to the city council's majority 31 January 2023 resolution to reject a state-driven aquatic centre

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<sup>1</sup> No explicit concept plan has been released as at June 2023. The November 2022 state planning documentation contained words only: [https://plan.sa.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/1172323/Adelaide-Aquatic-Centre-Code-Amendment-attachment-E4-acoustic-assessment.pdf](https://plan.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/1172323/Adelaide-Aquatic-Centre-Code-Amendment-attachment-E4-acoustic-assessment.pdf). The ruse is rather similar to the 2019 Adelaide Crows' park lands Park 2 takeover plan, and then only colour sketches were tabled. Was there ever a genuine state planning 2019 concept plan? Labor's current (2023) tactic may be similar, given that nothing is yet set in stone; merely subject of media release and ministerial spin. Like so many park lands raids in the past, much is based on bluff.

<sup>2</sup> Key words revealed in the Planning and Design Code for this site sub-zone include 'recreation area, shops, events'. The specifics relating to shops read: 'shops ancillary to a recreational use, club, sporting activity'. This opens up alternatives, once specifically restricted to swim facilities. But the new words "recreational use, club, sporting activity" are wide open to interpretation. On 10 June 2023 the ministerial spin did not address this.

project takeover of Park 2?<sup>3</sup> *[The state government is now pursuing a crash-or-crash-through bluff, hoping that it works ... exerting back room leverage on the city council to undo that resolution because of its own major budget woes. A clue is potential commercial club and administration use of sections of the new building, revealed in the draft Planning and Design Code.<sup>4</sup>]*

4. In what way are hundreds of concerned residential ratepayers living on adjacent Barton Terrace, North Adelaide, placated about the state government's fresh building relocation proposal (amended by shifting it by only 30 metres north) and what is that community's view now? *[The state government is hoping that this residential community might see this 'compromise' as sufficient compensation ... it is the city council that will have to manage post-construction noise complaints as the area south of the new building becomes a major events site, made possible through rezoning changes to the Planning and Design Code for that new 'sub-zone' land.]*
5. Given that the new project is to be constructed on an oval south of the existing swim centre, and not on the site of the existing centre, why must the existing swim centre close 18 months ahead of the completion of the new project?<sup>5</sup>
6. What is the state government putting into place about management of this park lands facility, given that its early demolition proposal will lead to the sacking of 126 aquatic centre staff to enable the facility to be shut down? Since when, and through what formal procedures, has the state government assumed management control of a City of Adelaide facility, and management control of City of Adelaide staff, on land tenured to the city council?<sup>6</sup>
7. How much money does the state government plan to extract from the city council to cover the cost of demolition of the existing aquatic centre? *[Moreover, will a state minister mandate a confidentiality order to obscure these deliberations, under the criteria allowed under section 90 (2) of the Local Government Act 1999? The Premier claimed some time ago on ABC radio that much of that cost would have to come from the council. Now Labor wants the existing site shut down 18 months before the new site is completed, alienating thousands of users, and resulting in more revenue loss for the council during this period. Who is really running this park lands facility – the*

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<sup>3</sup> (*InDaily*, 1 February 2023): <https://citymag.indaily.com.au/happening/community-council-throw-down-gauntlet-for-new-aquatic-centre-location/>

<sup>4</sup> The state's Code Amendment Proposal features 'performance outcome' wording at section 1.9: "Development at the Adelaide Aquatic Centre site consolidates and replaces existing buildings with recreational sporting club rooms, facilities, **and associated administrative functions.**" This is the key clause that will legitimise under planning law whatever the state government lodges in a development application. Note that ministers at the June 2023 media event did not address that matter. It probably explains why a multi-storey building is now favoured, and why the cost has blown out. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that there will be any legal requirement for formal public consultation about the DA because the proposal will be deemed to be complying with the code amendment, which the state government can adopt any time. Journalists failed to probe this on 10 June 2023.

<sup>5</sup> The government's concept 'sketches' in the ABC report of 10 June make clear that the proposed site is separate from the existing aquatic centre site, which is located further north. See the sketches – Search: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-10/adelaide-aquatic-centre-cost-blow-out/102465896>

<sup>6</sup> See point 4 above: wasn't that city council resolution to reject the proposal sufficiently clear?

*council as registered proprietor and custodian of this park lands site, or the state, 'under new-management-by-ministerial-decree'?*]

8. Given that the new project is to be built on land comprising an existing Park 2 oval, in regular use for year-round soccer and cricket games, what new arrangements will be made available to existing community users who will lose access to that oval? Have these groups been consulted, and is the result of that consultation available to the public? If not, why not?
9. Will the state government come clean about what is effectively a new park lands raid template (a takeover of Park 2 and facilities) that could have multiple knock-on consequences? *[See point 8 above, as well as the potential to trigger fresh bids by another lessee of land in Park 2, who may now seek to trigger a move to another adjacent park lands site to enable potential construction of new private school sports pavilion infrastructure under a fresh, long-term lease, and fresh playing field licence access to another nearby park lands site?]*



This is the proposed site for the new state government's \$135m aquatic centre (south-west corner of Park 2). Note that it is **not** the land occupied by the existing city council swim facility. ABC concept drawings reproduced in its online TV news article on 10 June 2023 illustrate this clearly: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-10/adelaide-aquatic-centre-cost-blow-out/102465896> One possible reason for the state government's determination to demolish the old aquatic centre demolition proposal early could be so that the car park will be vacated for exclusive use by teams of construction workers, and the former site, which by then would be cleared of rubble, would become a fenced construction works compound during the 18-month build period.

## OPINION

### **Electorate stoush now getting ugly – the *realpolitik* behind this story**

Before the 2022 election, Labor's tacticians hoped that the swim centre announcement would boost candidate Lucy Hood's chance of winning Adelaide. There were few details released in a Malinauskas announcement email, directed at voters in the electorate. Although it represented the classic 'announce and defend' approach there was no public pressure to defend the idea of throwing \$80m at electorate voters as a lure to 'Vote Lucy'. After the election, and after polling, Labor claimed that 78% of respondents used the existing aquatic centre. But the critical (political) statistics emerged in July 2022,

which revealed precisely what percentage lived in Ms Hood's electorate: 50.7 per cent.<sup>7</sup> More tellingly, only very small percentages of respondents came from western suburbs electorates, including those occupied by candidates Peter Malinauskas, Treasurer Steven Mullighan and Tom Koutstantonis. In other words, there was minimal political risk involved for those candidates, and they subsequently won the March 2022 election on comfortable margins.

Between late March and November 2022 Labor was able to capitalise on its aquatic centre proposal, while Plan SA was prevailed upon to deliver the planning means to rezone the Park 2 site to enable the big project. But the so-called brilliant idea of Labor's pre-poll tacticians then began to tarnish, as various groups pointed out anomalies relating to the project. The Adelaide Park Lands Association highlighted how public consultation seeking feedback had quarantined the potential site options to one place, Park 2 in the Adelaide park lands. Three grassed sites were identified – all in Park 2. Moreover, it was obvious that only one of these sites was viable: the site now subject to the proposal.

In early 2023 The Adelaide City Council began to hear significant objections from residential ratepayers on Barton Terrace, immediately adjacent to the site. On 31 January 2023 the council resolved to advise the Malinauskas government that it opposed the use of Park 2 as a site, and that it ought to 'find a new home' to replace the existing aquatic centre. It was at this point that Labor's strategists realised that the original plan to boost candidate Hood's pre-March-election chances was becoming difficult to control. Worse was to come, as revealed on Saturday 10 June, when minister Tom Koutsantonis announced that the existing aquatic centre would be shut down early, abandoning its thousands of users for 18 months (half of whom are in the electorate of Adelaide) while the new project got under way. This crossed a 'red line' in Labor's tactics book, which in its first 15 months has claimed that there would be no broken promises under Labor. Lucy Hood's pledge had been explicit and in writing:

*"Quotes attributable to Member for Adelaide Lucy Hood:*

*"Building the centre alongside the existing one allows current services to continue for the centre's thousands of users. This is so important, given the Aquatic Centre is such a unique community hub that keeps people active, healthy and connected."<sup>8</sup>*

On the morning of Monday 12 June 2023, ABC radio probed this broken promise, reminding all that Lucy Hood had faithfully pledged that the existing aquatic centre would stay open until the new centre was completed. The flak was taken by minister Koutsantonis. No doubt thousands of respondents to the state government's survey were listening intently, especially those among the 50.7 per cent who voted to elect Lucy Hood in March 2022.

No doubt there will be more to come, but at least one theme is already clear. Labor thinks it understands how good politics can be practised, but despite the 'expert' tacticians advising the Premier, there is still much to learn. Lesson #1: don't bilk the voters who put you there, especially early in a political career that the Adelaide incumbent hopes will last several terms. Lesson #2 is equally important: when a major park lands infrastructure build "blows out" by \$53m, the local member needs to explain what the real game is – in very specific detail. Is it merely a splash of swimming pools, or a major-events-site building, sections of which are likely to be leased to non-aquatic clubs and other commercial lessees?

*\*John Bridgland is a journalist and a City of Adelaide ratepayer.*

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<sup>7</sup> Source: July 2022 – "Residential postcodes for respondents" – *Adelaide Adelaide\_Aquatic\_Centre\_Engagement\_Summary\_Report\_for\_preferred\_location.pdf*. The postcodes included: 5000, 5006, 5081, 5082, 5083, 5084, 5085 – all in the electorate of Adelaide.

<sup>8</sup> Government of SA media release, Monday 5 September, 'Community backed location for new, 'state of the art' aquatic centre'.