

OPINION

State poll nears – just don't mention Adelaide's park lands

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The looming March 2022 state election will have at least one unusual feature, compared to a decade's previous polls. For the first time since 2010, the state government will go to the polls with two plans to raid the Adelaide park lands for major infrastructure construction projects. This is traditionally viewed as politically risky at the best of times, but especially in the lead-up to an election.

An extensive research paper I finalised in 2020, based on 20 years' study of park lands-related administration and politics (1998–2018), found that new legislation was required for only one major park lands' raid. In the 2010 election, Labor went to the poll with a \$450m pledge to redevelop the Adelaide oval. Legislation to allow it followed the party's win. But all of the other Labor government raids were made possible simply by exploiting existing legislative and administrative instruments and their loopholes, the details of which were often too baffling for many South Australians to comprehend. Administrations capitalised on a combination of extreme preparatory secrecy, an indifferent media, and high-level, planning-related complexity to achieve objectives. Most critically, the raids were prosecuted safely between elections, when voters could not use the ballot box to protest.

Everyone in 2021 knows about the Liberal Party's \$700m, 15,000 seat 'Riverbank Arena' concept tagged for park lands. But elsewhere, formalities for another multiple-hectare raid of a section of the western park lands (Bonython Park, Park 27, near the Old Adelaide Gaol) for car-parking purposes are also quietly being pursued.



State government concept plan drawings showing park lands car park infrastructure adjacent to the proposed site for the new Women's and Children's Hospital. Image courtesy of The Adelaide Parklands Association.



A March 2021 state government concept image showing a completed \$700m Riverbank Arena on the banks of Torrens Lake (centre, above right), a ten-minute walk from the Adelaide oval stadium (bottom right).

Close scrutiny of the image shows that all of the Lake's long-established rowing clubs have been demolished. When the 'arena concept' was announced it was met with much surprise among the clubs' managers and members. They alleged that the state Liberal Party had never discussed the demise of their club rooms, or the end of their leases, some of which guaranteed tenure for years to come. Did the government forget to foreshadow the demolitions with these 'key stakeholders', or was the arena plan just a 'thought bubble' among party tacticians, aimed simply at prompting community chatter to keep the party's pre-poll profile in the news?

Critical administrative steps must be taken now if the new Women's and Children's Hospital project – on a tiny piece of land near Port Road – is to get fully endorsed. State tacticians hope that Premier Marshall's arena 'vision' will divert attention from the new Women's and Children's Hospital (W&CH) project specifics, where a land raid will alienate an adjacent area of park lands bush in the form of a multi-storey car park, to be built when the hospital construction commences in five years. The building and other vast bitumenised parking areas would deliver 1215 spaces for hospital visitors, doubling existing capacity.

Major building projects like hospitals and related infrastructure need long lead times but the administrative and planning arrangements have to be embedded now. The W&CH project would have been first discussed in the highly secretive Capital City Committee, a body set up under the *City of Adelaide Act 1998*. Its legislation stipulates that all meetings must be held in a 'culture of confidence'. There are no publicly accessible minutes, and Freedom of Information searches are legislatively blocked. The next step is state cabinet approval. Subsequent details have been discussed, mostly in

secret, with the park lands' 'custodian', the Adelaide City Council. Government Riverbank precinct planning code amendment details were sent to the council on 7 July and are being fast-tracked for formalisation in the *Government Gazette* by November 2021. The pace suggests that any public consultation results will be irrelevant.

Ordinarily, state oppositions keep a watchful eye on such manoeuvres, ready to raise pre-election uproar, but Peter Malinauskas's Labor opposition is playing a low-key media game about this project. Despite that, news of the park lands raid is spreading across the electorate of Adelaide, a seat that Labor must win next March if it has any hope of forming government. It's held by Liberal Rachel Sanderson, on a razor thin margin. Labor's confidence about winning is threatened by the fact that electorate voters have always opposed state park lands exploitation for major building projects. It may be one reason why Labor's candidate, Lucy Hood, has been publicly shy about the hospital plan's necessity to raid the park lands for permanent car parking facilities. Rachel Sanderson has also publicly had little to say about her Party's hospital park lands car-park feature. Labor's tacticians are frightened that if Malinauskas protests about aspects of the new state health infrastructure project, it will look bad. An uproar about the car park land grab may be perceived to be criticism of the hospital plan. Labor already faces a major credibility problem because during its 16 years in power it left an appalling record of park lands' exploitation. Over its four consecutive terms (2002–2018) it initiated many big infrastructure construction projects on public land. The most divisive was the (fortunately failed) attempt by minister Kevin Foley to construct a three-storey \$33m 'grandstand' (in reality elite corporate boxes) in Victoria Park in 2007. Labor had deliberately waited until after the 2006 election to initiate it. Uproar followed and Labor retreated.

However, other successful Labor-driven raids followed, including the 2013, \$535m, Adelaide oval stadium redevelopment; the \$2.44b new Royal Adelaide Hospital; the 2014 \$40m River Torrens footbridge, the 2015 O-Bahn line infrastructure extension tunnelling through Rymill Park; and the 2018 five-storey \$100m Adelaide Botanic High School. After Labor lost in 2018, construction of a \$42m, multiple-storey hotel attached to the oval stadium was approved by a new Marshall administration in Year 1 of its first term (December 2018). There was no public consultation. Despite

extensive secret discussions in the years to 2018 (under Labor's watch) the hotel plan had never been foreshadowed before the March 2018 election.

There is irony about Labor's 2002–2018 record because Mike Rann's team in Labor's first term had passed new legislation, the *Adelaide Park Lands Act 2005*, with an explicit brief to 'protect' and 'enhance' the park lands. This led to the creation of the city council subsidiary, the Adelaide Park Lands Authority, a board that Rann pledged would be independent and have teeth. In reality it had no authority to block raids, because the 2005 Act required determination control by a state minister. Most of the big raids were prosecuted while Jay Weatherill was premier (2011–18).

Labor's major dilemma ahead of the election will be widespread Adelaide electorate perception of gross hypocrisy if Labor champions the W&CH concept plan – that just happens to require a permanent, major car park area alienation of the park lands to accompany the project. Labor-confected uproar about the car park raid would trigger cynical memories of the party's previous projects, which permanently appropriated significant sections of Adelaide's park lands and left some very large buildings as reminders of Labor's bad habits.

The Liberals' Torrens Lake Riverbank Arena plan may act as a pre-poll diversion to keep the electorate of Adelaide's voters from better understanding and exploring the W&CH park lands' car-park raid. But they are waking up fast.

If the party does manage to win the '22 election, it always has the option of stalling the arena concept, using its huge cost as an excuse. Senior ministers in March 2021 already knew that finding \$700m for an arena when the state budget is drowning in a sea of red is the stuff of COVID-19-induced political fantasy. But elections often capitalise on fantasy and, as Labor discovered in 2010, sport-based fantasies can be highly seductive. Tactically it's crucial that the 'arena concept' remain on the table in the election lead-up, if only to keep voters chattering about the controversial, sports-based vision. But both park lands' projects represent a highly risky reminder to voters so near a state poll that state governments cannot be trusted when it comes to exploitation of 'free' inner-city public land that everyone assumes is 'protected'.

As I learned in my years of research, historically it's one of Adelaide's greatest delusions.

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