

Olympic funding cuts spark backlash

EXCLUSIVE

SAM BUCKINGHAM-JONES

Two of Australia's most senior sports officials have savaged a new strategy to fund the nation's sports, saying it amounts to cuts that will damage Australia's chances at the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

Australian Olympic Committee chief executive Matt Carroll and Athletics Australia, president Mark Arbib said the new funding model announced by the Australian Sports Commission yesterday rewarded and punished sports without justification and lacked the transparency of old strategies.

The Australian Institute of Sport defended the new \$105 million-a-year framework, saying the vast majority of Olympic and Paralympic sports would, in an unprecedented move, have their current funding guaranteed for the next two years.

From January, 12 high-performance programs will get a \$6.7m funding boost, the AIS said.

Australian women's soccer will get an \$800,000 increase over two years, rugby sevens will get \$605,000 and women's softball will get \$400,000.

Of the 45 to 50 high-performance sports funded by the AIS, 40 have had their funding secured to Tokyo 2020.

Diving, men's hockey and shooting will get extra funding, but athletics, water polo, volleyball and gymnastics have been asked to justify a portion of their funding.

Mr Arbib, a former Labor senator, said Athletics Australia had been guaranteed 80 per cent of its current annual funding from next financial year but must demonstrate why it should receive the additional 20 per cent.

He said it was "insulting" for Sports Australia to laud the funding changes, which may well impact the junior levels of athletics.

"It's a very disappointing day for Australian athletics. To receive a 20 per cent cut in our budget two years out from the Tokyo Games is a disaster. It makes things very perilous for



Carroll



Arbib

athletes, coaches and our athletics community," he said.

"Only seven months ago our Aussie athletics team topped the medal tally on the Gold Coast at the Commonwealth Games, beating powerhouses like England, Kenya and Jamaica. This decision does not make sense."

Mr Arbib described the new funding system as "harsher" and more blatantly medal-focused, and said it was difficult for sporting bodies to plan with only 80 per cent of funding guaranteed.

"To cut 20 per cent of a budget overnight and say we should be thankful for it is insulting to the athletics community," he said.

"It's a slap in the face. We will have to look at cutting programs supporting up-and-coming athletes and community programs."

Mr Carroll said Sport Australia's funding had been reduced by 20 per cent over the past eight years and there was "not enough money" for Australian sport.

"We are realistic. Sports need to be accountable and there is only so much money to go around but it is very difficult to plan and produce high performance in this environment," he said.

"The return is a significant community health dividend along with the benefits that Australian athletes performing on the international stage bring, such as national pride, inspiration to youth and social cohesion."

AIS director Peter Conde said no final decisions had been made about athletics, water polo, volleyball and gymnastics, and said the strategy replaced the old Winning Edge plan: "Our role is to carefully manage application of public funding."

"This money has to go a long way. It's high-performance funding, it does have to be related to performance."

SPORT P30-32

Brown lobbyist walking Canberra's floors for a Tasmanian track

EXCLUSIVE

MATTHEW DENHOLM
TASMANIA CORRESPONDENT

Bob Brown has hired a lobbyist to win federal funding for a \$20 million bushwalking trail through Tasmania's Tarkine region, and initial reaction in Canberra has reportedly been positive.

Registered lobbyist Dan Cass confirmed he was being paid by the Bob Brown Foundation to push the proposal for an "iconic" multi-day walk to rival The Overland Track.

"The Trans Tarkine Track pro-

posal gets support across the political aisle on its merits, but it is still crucial to have someone paid to walk the corridors and get it before the government, opposition and crossbench," Mr Cass said.

"The environment sometimes gets forgotten in politics so it is vital that the ... foundation knows how to use all the tools available in the democratic process. It is gratifying to be opening doors in Canberra for the foundation."

Dr Brown defended the use of a lobbyist, saying lobbying was effective and helped politicians get across detail quickly.

"Lobbying of politicians works," Dr Brown said. "That's



Brown

why the mining and the logging and the 4WD-vehicle organisations have lobbying permanently in Canberra."

Dr Brown and outdoor clothing company Patagonia have commissioned PwC to develop a

detailed business case for the project. The former federal Greens leader said he was heartened that neither of the major parties had rejected the project, and urged them to consider the economic benefits for the region's marginal seat of Braddon.

"It is a superb proposal," he said. "It can only win votes in Braddon, a very marginal seat, and beyond that the proposal would win votes right across the country from a whole lot of swing voters who are keen on the environment and being able to experience it."

Mr Cass and a group of 15 northwest Tasmanian tourism entrepreneurs will hold a press

conference at Parliament House in Canberra today to back the Trans Tarkine Track, arguing it would spread jobs and wealth to a region in need of both.

Among the group is former Tourism Australia managing director Ken Boundy, who runs several Tarkine tourism businesses. "Scott Morrison understands tourism and should see the economic value the Trans Tarkine Track will generate in Tasmania and the value it will add to brand Australia," Mr Boundy said.

Mr Cass, who also works on energy policy and regulation for the Australia Institute, said the response in Canberra was positive.

"I've had good conversations with the government, opposition and crossbench," Mr Cass said.

The Tarkine is home to one of the largest tracts of temperate rainforest in the southern hemisphere, as well as remote, wild coastline and rich Aboriginal archaeological sites.

However, it is not a national park and Dr Brown sees the track project as an alternative to logging or mining in the Tarkine.

Mr Cass is being assisted in Canberra by Greg Irons, director of Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary, near Hobart, and of Tarkine Trails, an existing walking business in the northwest region.

Bells about to peal for little-known treasure



COLIN MURTY

'One of the finest cathedrals of the 20th century': Father Robert Cross at Geraldton's recently restored St Francis Xavier Cathedral

VICTORIA LAURIE

The pealing of bells will complete a historic makeover for Geraldton's St Francis Xavier Cathedral, deemed one of Australia's three finest cathedrals and the nation's least-known religious treasure.

The four-year labour of love has involved major repairs, dramatic lighting, the entombment of a former bishop in a glass vault in the cathedral's floor, and the casting of the largest set of church bells installed in Australia.

Father Robert Cross, a trained archeologist and the cathedral's heritage director, has overseen the restoration of both the cathedral and the reputation of its remarkable creator, Monsignor John Hawes.

British-born Hawes, an archi-

tect and convert to Catholicism, arrived in Western Australia in 1914 and designed dozens of churches and religious buildings across the state's midwest. Geraldton's cathedral took 20 years to finish, and included many fittings and decorations that Hawes personally made.

Cathedrals of the World, a lavish Automobile Association book in which two British academics listed the top 83 cathedrals in the world, nominated only three in Australia — in Sydney, Melbourne and Geraldton.

The authors described St Francis Xavier as "one of the finest cathedrals of the 20th century ... all the more impressive because it is so unexpected."

Father Cross said Hawes rejected the grey, neo-Gothic style of eastern-state cathedrals,



Hawes, right, in the 1920s

favouring styles that suited Western Australia's earth colours and hot climate. "If you look at the facade, you see the Spanish Mission style of Santa Barbara in California," he said. "Then inside

is Romanesque, the domes are Florentine, and the stripes give it a Byzantine or Moorish influence.

"One of Hawes's talents was to mix architectural styles and yet create harmony. And his buildings seem to grow out of the ground."

A "Spirit from Stone" heritage trail begins at the cathedral's new Hawes Heritage Centre and leads tourists on a journey across Hawes's former parish. He rode on horseback, often in searing heat, for hundreds of kilometres to preach and help build the churches he designed.

Few other Australians have designed, executed, and constructed by hand as many buildings as Hawes, who was designing a cathedral for Ballarat in Victoria when he died in 1956 in the US.

"He is a tourism icon of global

significance, and there's growing interest in the man," says Father Cross. "Every time people come into the church they are amazed by the amount of work that he did."

In a few weeks, the final touch will be achieved: 27 bells pealing out from the cathedral's western towers. The new bells, cast by the last remaining bell foundry in England, have a WA connection. The foundry, John Taylor Bells, is part-owned by retired West Australian mining executive, bell-ringer and Hawes enthusiast Leith Reynolds.

"I greatly admire Hawes for his dedication and for his faith," he said. If St Mary's Cathedral in Perth had been built to Hawes's Romanesque design, which was rejected at the time, "it would also have been a great building."

Mosque protester challenges conviction

EXCLUSIVE

TESSA AKERMAN

A far-right activist who participated in the beheading of an effigy to protest against the building of the Bendigo mosque says the Victorian act under which he was convicted is unconstitutional and wants the High Court to hear his case.

Blair Cottrell was convicted last year in the Melbourne Magistrates Court of serious racial vilification under the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act over a video he made with two other men protesting against the Bendigo City Council's approval of a mosque.

He is appealing his conviction in the County Court but there is currently no trial date set while he pursues action in the High Court.

In the video, Mr Cottrell thanked the council for building the mosque and said the men would give "a taste of our own religious culture" before the other two men used a toy sword to behead the mannequin, spilling a red-coloured liquid from the neck and head over the footpath and walls. The men could be heard shouting Allah Akbar while the beheading occurred.

In his application before the High Court, Mr Cottrell says the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act affects political discourse.

"A problem arises because the terms 'serious contempt for, or revulsion or severe ridicule' are inapt, inept, for use with respect to political discourse," the application said.

The application said protesters and law enforcement wouldn't know whether a politi-



Cottrell

cal act was unlawful until after the Director of Public Prosecutions decided whether the case was worthy of prosecution.

"The exercise of general powers activated by a suspected breach of the (Racial and Religious Tolerance Act) will likely result in persons wrongly being stopped from political protest, moved on and their protests being brought to an end, and them being deterred from further protests in the foreseeable future," lawyers for Mr Cottrell claimed.

Lawyers for the DPP filed a response, arguing that the identification of a constitutional issue was not sufficient cause to remove the matter to the High Court. "There is nothing to suggest that this matter requires the urgent determination of the High Court," they said.

They said the County Court could determine the constitutional issue with a potential judicial review by the Supreme Court.

Lawyers for Mr Cottrell said the matter was "in the national interest of Australia". "He should be relieved of the burden of an order for costs in favour of the respondent in order not to discourage ordinary Australian citizens seeking bona fide constitutional relief," they said.

Separated twins leaving hospital

Bhutanese twins Nima and Dawa have left a Melbourne hospital as individual "cheeky" girls, weeks after life-changing surgery to separate them. The 15-month-old sisters, who had spent their lives joined at the torso, left the Royal Children's Hospital in a pram yesterday with their mum, Bhumchu Zangmo, after successful surgery on November 9.

Lead pediatric surgeon Joe Cramer said the girls were recovering well, but there was no date set for their return to Bhutan.

"The twins have made an excellent recovery and are now starting to act independently and move around," Dr Cramer said.

"I was pleased to see they were somewhat smiling (today)."

He said the staff had seen the "two remarkable girls" transform since becoming independent.

"Girls who started off really attached and bonded to another, but ultimately frustrated with one another," Dr Cramer said.

"We saw them become incredibly anxious after the surgery once they knew their other twin was not immediately in front of them. Over the last couple of weeks, we have seen them gain confidence, gain independence and gain a lot of strength."

Dr Cramer said being able to stand would be a "work in progress" for the girls as they build up strength and balance.

While they are yet to form full



ALEX COPPEL

Dawa, top, and Nima leave hospital with mum yesterday

words, Dr Cramer said the Wiggles' signature finger move had become their favourite while in hospital. "They are cheeky. Dawa has turned on me," he joked.

"I thought she was going to be eternally grateful to me for getting her sister off her but she just seems to get grumpy with me."

"When they are comfortable in their own space, they are very cheeky. They like to replicate the Wiggles."

The former king of Bhutan wrote a letter to hospital chief executive Joe Stanway, thanking staff for changing the girls' lives. Jigme Singye Wangchuck wrote: "The successful surgery has made

it possible for Nima and Dawa to enjoy a happy and meaningful life in Bhutan."

The girls will travel with their mother to the Children First Foundation's Kilmore retreat, 60km north of Melbourne, to continue recovering. The foundation helped bring the family to Australia for the surgery.

"What the two girls need is stimulation of other children to challenge them, to give them interest and that will do wonders for the girls," Dr Cramer said.

As Ms Zangmo wheeled her girls out, she paused to say in English: "Thank you, everyone."

AAAP

Port Pirie lead levels put smelter on notice

MICHAEL OWEN

There are a "concerning" number of children at higher risk of serious health effects from the operation of Port Pirie's lead smelter, the latest lead-in-air tests for the industrial South Australian city show.

SA Health yesterday published its third-quarter analysis of blood lead levels in children in Port Pirie, 230km north of Adelaide. Average blood test results for two-year-olds, the most reliable indicator of lead exposure for the population, showed an increase of 0.4 micrograms per decilitre to an average of 5.8.

The number of children at high risk of health effects with blood lead levels above 20 micrograms increased to 12 children, compared with seven in the third quarter of last year.

The National Health and Medical Research Council warned that blood lead levels above 10 micrograms can have harmful effects. Levels greater than five micrograms, particularly in children and pregnant women, need to be reduced.

SA Health's scientific services director David Simon said the results were concerning but not unexpected given the recent rise

in lead-in-air emissions and the difficulty smelter operator Nyrstar has had in controlling emissions during its redevelopment.

The Belgian metals giant is dangerously close to breaching its licence conditions.

"All families with a child with blood lead levels of five micrograms or above receive support to lower lead exposure," Dr Simon said.

"Case workers work intensively with those with blood lead levels of 20 micrograms or above to provide tailored interventions."

"While the results are disappointing, the 12-month report is the best indicator of blood lead levels so we will have a better understanding once that is complete early next year."

Environment Protection Authority science director Keith Baldry said while Nyrstar was compliant with its licence, the agency was concerned about an increase in emissions.

The findings come days after Nyrstar's chief, Hilmar Rode, visited Port Pirie to discuss the company's plans, which include 120 job losses next year.

The company is locked in talks with the state government about repaying more than \$290m in debt guaranteed by taxpayers.

Falling dams trigger desal

ELIAS VISONTAY

Sydney's falling dam levels are set to activate the city's \$1.8 billion desalination plant, dormant since it was built in 2010, for the first time later this week.

The levels of several capital city dams continue to fall at rapid rates, as experts call for desalination and water-restriction measures to be brought in earlier.

Dam levels in Sydney were yesterday 0.4 per cent above the 60 per cent level that triggers the switch-on order for the desalination plant. Levels have fallen 0.6 per cent since last week, more than 23 per cent in the year.

A Sydney Desalination Plant spokesman said testing at the Kurnell facility was recently completed, and the plant was ready to be switched on when the "drought trigger" was reached.

It is understood the plant's operator hired more staff over the past few months, including senior engineers and university graduates in preparation of its activation.

The plant's imminent activation comes after delayed repairs resulting from storm damage in 2015. Repairs, held up by a dispute between the private operator and its insurer, were finished only in recent months.

The plant costs about \$195 million a year to maintain when dormant, adding about \$85 a year to each household's water bill. If the plant is switched on, the cost to consumers will rise to \$130, according to a report by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal in NSW.

Ian Wright, a lecturer in environmental science at Western Sydney University and a former water scientist at Sydney Water, said the city's water levels were falling at such a rate that the desalination plant was not able to fully offset current losses in water supply.

He said desalination production should be introduced earlier.

"It could be turned on by the end of this week. Through everyday use and a lack of rain, the city is haemorrhaging 1600 megalitres of water a day. That's a stunning loss," he said.

The plant's maximum capacity for production is 250ML a day, about 15 per cent of the city's daily usage.

If dam levels drop below 50 per cent, Sydney could be just months away from its first water restrictions in nine years.

"Everyone thinks desalination plants will solve every problem with water supply but at 15 per cent in Sydney, it just won't," Mr Wright said.

"It will only reach that output speed after eight months in use, and it will be three to four months before the plant begins contributing to Sydney's water supply."

"When we've got places in central NSW on level-six restrictions, we need to share the pain earlier on."

"I'm concerned for every capital city. Urban Australians are disconnected from reality. We just turn on taps and don't think about it."

In Melbourne, water supply levels are at 62 per cent, down 6 per cent from last year.

Desalination plants are producing water in Adelaide, where levels have dropped 18 per cent in the past year to 62 per cent full.

Perth, which has permanent water restrictions in place and whose desalination plants have a greater capacity than Sydney's and are in constant use, has water levels at 52 per cent, up from 39 per cent a year ago.

Brisbane dams are at 75 per cent, the same figure as last year.