John Wishart

Money, Men and the Motor Car:
The Grand Prix comes to Town

The first Formula One Grand Prix motor race to be held in Australia took place in Adelaide on Sunday, 3 November, 1985. In this article, John Wishart looks at how the race was successfully marketed, the values being promoted, and the significance of the Grand Prix in the re-election of the Bannon Labor government.

"KEKE IS KING, BUT ADELAIDE YOU ARE THE NUMBER ONE" — So screamed the banner headline on the day after the big race.

Keke Rosberg, a tough-looking 36-year-old Finn, had just outdriven 24 other kamikaze he-men to become the winner of the Australian Formula One Mitsubishi Grand Prix for 1985. Grand Prix razzamatazz showered on Adelaide. A new set of daring heroes had been created overnight. A glamorous international motoring elite of enormous wealth blew in and out of town in the space of five days. Over 107,000 people ringed the track to be bombarded by noise and fumes. Adelaide came alive, as we were endlessly told, and Premier Bannon pulled off a remarkable political coup.

The Grand Prix was a celebration of commercialism elitism and wealth; a long weekend of homage to money, the male and the motor car. Big time sport had once again become a powerful instrument of mass integration and identification — in this case, playing on the parochialism of Adelaide and South Australians, and reasserting a particular form of materialist values.

How did it happen? What was the role of the Bannon government? And how important was the race to the ALP's convincing electoral victory one month later.

Background to the Race

The Formula One Grand Prix originated as a high class West European sporting contest among the manufacturers and designers of prestige cars. In recent years, race organisers have been keen to turn the event into a truly world-wide phenomenon, adding to the existing circuits in Europe, the Americas and South Africa, and delivering new audiences to the advertising industry. Various business people and motor enthusiasts in Australia had been interested in the idea of an Australian Grand Prix for five years or so, with Canberra and Sydney as possible venues.

In early 1983, on the recommendation of the Jubilee 150 Board, established to commemorate 150 years of (white) settlement in South Australia, negotiations for staging the event in Adelaide commenced. Kim Bonython of the establishment Bonython family, and Bill O'Gorman, another Adelaide businessman fond of fast cars, were very active lobbyists at this stage. So, too, was Wendy Chapman, Adelaide City Council's Mayor and tourist businesswoman.

The Jubilee 150 Board was primarily interested in introducing the race in 1986, the Jubilee Year, but the Formula One Constructors' Association (FOCA) was looking for a new venue commencing in 1985. Perceiving the political and economic advantages of securing the event in late 1985, close to the end of his first three-year term, Labor Premier John Bannon threw his weight behind the bid to get the race. This culminated in a trip to London in October 1984 where he hammered out a deal with the chief of FOCA, Bernie Ecclestone.

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Without inside knowledge, it is difficult to say exactly what clinched the race for Adelaide, but the preparedness of the South Australian Premier to involve himself personally in the negotiations impressed FOCA. Another factor was the proposed race circuit and surrounds — a route through the eastern sector of Adelaide's broad streets, taking in the Victoria Park racecourse, against the backdrop of the attractive and spacious Adelaide parklands. From a race promoter's point of view it offered a first-class street circuit with plenty of room for ancillary facilities.

The deal awarded the race to Adelaide for a minimum of three years commencing in October 1985, with a probable extension to seven years. It was to be sponsored and organised by the South Australian government: FOCA
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and the government would split income from sponsorships on a 50:50 basis. Rights for TV coverage were to be the subject of separate negotiations between FOCA and the networks.

The SA government had just 12 months to prepare the circuit — and the people. No time was wasted.

Marketing and Managing the Event

The SA government, while financially underwriting the race and assisting, along with the Adelaide City Council, to provide the infrastructure, allowed the private sector to play a big role in promoting and organising the event. A Grand Prix Board was established immediately to oversee preparations, and this board, in turn, awarded contracts for work and services and concluded sponsorship deals with various private companies. Legislation was pushed through the state parliament very quickly, giving the Grand Prix Board wide powers to act, and exempting it from six Acts of Parliament which normally place controls on the use of public lands where noise, traffic and planning matters are concerned.

The composition of the Grand Prix Board helped seal the “partnership” of big business, government and the public service. It comprises: Chairman - Tim Marcus Clark, managing director of the State Bank of SA; Deputy Chairman - Ian Cocks, managing director of Direct Mix Holdings; Executive Director - Max Hemmerling, former director of Cabinet Office, SA Premier's Office; and the following ordinary Grand Prix Board members: Jim Jarvis, present Lord Mayor of Adelaide; John Hadaway, city engineer, Adelaide Council; Wendy Chapman, director of Sandford Travel and former Lord Mayor of Adelaide; John Large, chairman of the Confederation of Australian Motor Sport; Bill O'Gorman, National Development Manager, Elders IXL; and Geoff Whitbread, city manager of the Kensington and Norwood Council.

This alliance of state government, local government and business people set to work, ably assisted, as the event drew near, by the large motor companies and the other transnationals which use the Grand Prix races for product promotion. It was a formidable machine which smoothly quelled the initial fears and scepticism of many of the locals, and stroked the egos of Adelaideans until this foreign motoring extravaganza became their very own carnival on wheels.

There were some doubting Thomases, nonetheless. The idea of turbo-charged racing cars roaring through the sedate parklands at speeds of up to 300 kms per hour did not appeal to all. The race was to pass some of the inner city's most exclusive residences, as well as a few hospitals and commercial properties. To some, it was, initially, a somewhat ludicrous combination, an ill-fitting addition to the image of Adelaide as the city of churches. Others wondered how they would get to work in their own cars, given that major streets were to be sealed off for a week and surrounded by grandstands, wire mesh and concrete safety barriers.

Public Relations Gloss

Race organisers stressed the commercial benefits of the race, the fame it would bring to Adelaide, and the careful steps that would be taken to minimise disruption and inconvenience. In a letter of reply to one critic, Premier Bannon gave an assurance that “every effort will be made to minimise the impact of the Grand Prix on the environment”. No well-established trees would be removed, not permanent structures would be erected in the parklands. Residents were to be given special consideration with parking and access to their homes. They would be fully compensated for any damage to property caused by errant racing cars. Before the SA Parliamentary Committee on Public Works, Dr Mul
The Grand Prix Board established a Community Liaison Committee which its chairperson, Wendy Chapman, described as "The human element of the Grand Prix organisation". The committee worked tirelessly getting information out to residents, traders and schools. Thousands of Grand Prix community information kits were distributed voluntarily by the Boy Scouts in affected areas, and, closer to the event, a special information office was set up to handle inquiries.

The major public relations emphasis, however, was not defensive, but positive. Extensive media publicity accompanied the race build-up, trumpeting the latest construction achievements and developing a sense of excitement. Adelaide would be put on the international map. One glossy brochure from the Grand Prix office noted that "Formula One Grand Prix races are seen by more people than any other sport except the Olympics and soccer's World Cup". In 1984, it boasted, the race was shown in 47 countries reaching 650 million viewers. This huge, world-wide audience could now be reached by a single commercial.

T
de the race was touted as an economic bonanza from which all Adelaide residents would benefit, not just the business community. Much was made of the need for accommodation as an anticipated 80,000 people descended on Adelaide. Early in 1985, hoteliers and landlords began doubling and trebling tariffs for the Grand Prix period, and many householders began sheathing their houses for the week and make a killing as interstate and overseas visitors scoured the city looking for a bed. As things turned out, unregulated profiteering was largely avoided by the Grand Prix Board establishing an accommodation system run by TAA. Visitors were mainly catered for by utilising existing commercial accommodation in Adelaide and surrounding districts.

From the mid-1970s, South Australia had experienced a decline in its manufacturing industries, with the significant rationalisation and job losses in the auto, white goods and engineering sectors. In this climate, it has been a common practice of business leaders and successive state governments to "talk up" new initiatives, making exaggerated claims about the resultant economic impact. This has sometimes served to overcome popular opposition to a project, as occurred over the Roxby Downs uranium-copper-gold mine or, more generally, to reassure an electorate nervous about the closure or contraction of what were considered to be rock-solid enterprises (e.g. Kelvinators, GMH Woodville, Whyalla shipyards). The promotion of the Grand Prix as a massive boost to the state's economy fits into this pattern.

Grand Prix Values

The Grand Prix was a great celebration of the motor car. And what more fitting place for this to occur than in Adelaide, heavily dependent on GMH and Mitsubishi car plants .... "

Teams tour with their own chefs and hundreds of support staff. The phrase Grand Prix Glitterati was coined by the media to describe the travelling circus of famous people accompanying the teams. Ringo Starr was sighted; Paul Newman was rumoured to be in town; would Frank Sinatra make a visit; and so it went on. The emphasis on personal wealth intruded into the race commentary itself with the TV presenter excitedly shouting comments in the following vein: "An here's Keke Rosberg who lives in Boffs, drives his own private plane and is immensely wealthy — a great wheeler-dealer coming up to challenge Johansson for the lead."

Above all, it was a great field day for the advertisers. We are accustomed to seeing Australian footballers and cricketers with product names on caps and clothes, but this is small beer in comparison to the Grand Prix, with drivers and vehicles moving, walking, talking billboards almost completely covered by multinational corporate sponsors — Marlboro, Cannon, ICI, Mobil, Goodyear, Shell, Pirelli, Simod, Dow, Olivetti and the car companies to boot. Add to this the billboards lining the track and the race became, on TV footage, a set of dodgem cars weaving in and out between a panoply of brand names.

Media Enthusiasm

The day following the race. Adelaide journalists put the final touches on the cultural message the race promoters had been trying to construct. Nigel Hopkins, in
a piece called “Goodbye innocent Adelaide, hello map of the world”, wrote:

*It was the day that put Adelaide on the map. It was the day in which we lost the innocence of a big country town and became a rather more grown up city. The Grand Prix circus came here thinking we’d be Hicksville. But we weren’t and all of us know it now: there’s no need for any colonial cringe any more.*

Popular columnist Des Colquhoun scaled new heights in male chauvinism in his contribution. “Winning ways of dear city”, likening the city to a young woman who had just opened her legs to accommodate the great event:

...by God, she (Adelaide) can really hang one on when it comes to staging a non-stop, four-day sunny binge of life in the fast lane. Beneath her sedate girdle of parklands she is a playgirl, a lovable big-haireded sweetheart, brazen, boozing and disarmingly generous with her innocent favours.

In the week leading up to the event, the electronic media was a perpetual publicist for the Grand Prix built around the theme “Adelaide Alive”. And if anyone still doubted it, then the rear of Formula One vehicles on the Friday, Saturday and Sunday for a radius of eight kms and further if the wind was blowing your way, certainly proved that something was going on in town.

Even after the barrage of hype, some questioned the value of the event. A few serious minded citizens wrote troubled letters to the editor. Friends of the Earth held a Petit Prix to promote bicycle travel around the city, and a good many remained cynical about the Grand Prix as a political exercise. But the media made sure that none of this really counted for much. There were no banner headlines drawing attention to the fact that the Grand Prix circus had just come fresh from a race in jack-booted South Africa. No hard-nosed analyses about alternative productive uses of the enormous amounts of money spent on the race. The promise of a dollar to be turned and a job to be found, however transitory, received the emphasis.

The Grand Prix project reinforced a number of key values which are widely held in the society — rampant materialism, adulation of money and what it can buy in lifestyle, the excitement of fast cars, unquestioning support for new whizz-bang technologies, the necessity for star people and the notion that big is beautiful. Playing on parochial attitudes, the race promoters suggested that everyone could benefit from life in the fast lane, however vicariously. The hype further legitimised conspicuous consumption by the well-off at a time of growing poverty and persistently high unemployment. It pushed aside concern about the expenditure of public money on froth and bubble economic projects while funds for basic social services remained in short supply.

It was in this atmosphere that the state elections took place.

The part of the Grand Prix in Labor’s re-election

On Sunday, 10 November, a week after the race, Premier Bannon announced 7 December as the state election date. This date had been one of the ALP’s favoured options, coming just three years after they defeated the Tonkin Liberal government in 1982.

The electorate endorsed Bannon’s team resoundingly, giving the new administration a four-year term following amendments to the State Electoral Act in 1983. The average swing to Labor was around three percent in the lower house but, more importantly, it occurred in all the right places — in the crucial metropolitan marginal seats.

The final figures for the House of Assembly gave the ALP 27 seats (23 in the old parliament), Liberals 16 (21), Independent Labor 2 (2), Independent Liberal 1 (0), Nationals 1 (1).

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In the upper house, the Legislative Council, the Australian Democrats secured the last seat, giving them two members in the new parliament and the balance of power in the house of review.

It was a big defeat for John Olsen’s Liberals who finished with only five out of 33 metropolitan seats, losing two of their most senior figures and former ministers — Dean Brown and Michael Wilson. The ALP went from being a minority government in the old parliament, dependent on the support of two Independent Labor renegades, to being a government with a comfortable majority in its own right.

How significant was the Grand Prix in securing Labor’s re-election? It is difficult to be precise, and easy to over-estimate, single factors. However, the Grand Prix was

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important for Labor, symbolising neatly and visibly what the Bannon government stood for. It served to color in, in the public's mind, an image which Bannon had been sketching in over his three years of government.

The Grand Prix was a symbol of exciting state development, more apparent than real, but attractive nonetheless to many voters who didn't want to hear about the Liberals' rather dull and negative alternatives. The Labor government utilised the race, along with the just-completed Casino and the Adelaide Railway Station and Environ's Redevelopment Project (ASER) to show that the state was on the move. Essentially, this constituted an economic strategy centre on the tourist industry and the luxury market — a poor alternative to one aiming at a strong indigenous manufacturing sector in key industries. Amid the media euphoria, heightened by the approaching Jubilee Year in 1986, the precariousness of this economic strategy hardly seemed to matter.

The Bannon Factor

Over a full-page gigantic head and shoulders picture of John Bannon, the copy read:

Only this man can keep South Australia up and running. While the Liberals were nitpicking and whingeing, John Bannon was putting South Australia on the map ... Grand Prix, ASER, yes, 30,000 jobs, front-runner for the submarines. Now we're up and running we can't afford to risk the future. Don't take a chance. South Australia needs John Bannon.

This ALP election ad demonstrates another important ingredient in their success — the standing of Bannon as a politician. He is the most popular political leader in Australia in 1985, consistently scoring over 75 percent approval rating in the surveys. Bannon was seen as being personally responsible for the Grand Prix, intervening to clinch the deal and skilfully overseeing its very professional completion. The same approach has been used with a number of other development initiatives, notably over the bid to get the federal government's submarine contract. Despite his conservatism, almost shy personal presentation, Bannon is increasingly regarded as a "man of action", the marathon runner who has been able to win the race to develop South Australia, to get things moving again. It's not surprising, then, that the ALP made its election campaign slogan: "South Australia is up and running".

The State Government as Enabler for Business

The Grand Prix was also a very good case study in Labor's partnership with private enterprise. The government fulfilled an entrepreneurial role, assisting private sector operations — an enabling role quite different from the big government image which conservatives like to paint Labor as encouraging (and which some socialists privately dream of).

At a large rank-and-file union forum dealing with privatisation, the premier spelled out his philosophy on the role of government. He spoke of the need for "a strong partnership between the public and private sectors". "The public sector," he said, "was essential for the state's survival but, at the same time, it should be neither inefficient nor expand haphazardly into areas where the private sector was performing well." Public Service "inefficiency and low productivity could not be tolerated, and he supported greater "commercialisation of public sector activities".

This idea of a lean government performing an entrepreneurial role to assist private enterprise has generated considerable support among the business community and the media. It made it very difficult for opposition leader John Olsen to make much ground when he launched his ham-fisted privatisation crusade. Surveys in the marginal electorates close to the poll showed voters to be much more concerned about taxes and economic matters than privatisation. Many middle-of-the-road voters were probably fairly happy with the state government's approach. On top of this, with budgetary restraints and staff ceilings clamped on hard for the full three years of the Bannon administration, there was little opportunity for the Liberals to credibly paint Labor as promoters of a bloated public sector killing off private enterprise.

In fact, to a marked extent, the Bannon government echoed the Playford style in the area of economic development. During Playford's long reign as SA's premier, the Liberal Country League government was very active in attracting manufacturers, offering financial concessions and government underwritten infrastructure as enticements. Bannon, in the changed circumstances of the 1980s, is also operating in this way. Thus, he is following a model with which many South Australians are familiar.

When claiming victory on election night, a triumphant John Bannon faced the media, not in his regulation coat and tie, but sporting a windcheater emblazoned with the Formula One Grand Prix logo. The party faithful, gathered together, cheered enthusiastically.

The Liberal election night party was much quieter as Olsen's team stared at the prospect of a Bannon Decade and their years in the wilderness. They were very subdued, just as they had been a month earlier when the glamorous motor racing heroes roared through town to the applause of a huge crowd assembled.

FOOTNOTES

1. Advertiser, 5 12 84.
3. The SA Department of State Development estimated local tourist revenue from the 1985 race to be $3.5 million. It predicted an overall injection of $15 million into the local economy with the equivalent 850 jobs of one year's duration. The department acknowledged that these figures could only be rough estimates and it was an untried project. The Grand Prix Board has yet to release figures on the economic impact of the race.
4. Advertiser, 4 11 85.
5. Advertiser, 4 11 85.
6. Advertiser, 4 11 85.
7. State public service trade union seminar on "Privatisation". Trades Hall, Adelaide, 18 11 85. Address by J. Bannon.
8. During the election campaign, the usually pro-Liberal Press Advertiser supported the Labor Party.

John Wishart is a CPA activist from Adelaide interested in environment and labour movement issues.