

Politicians keep pressure on

MURRAYLANDS MPs have spent the past fortnight heaping pressure on the State Government over the diversification affair.

Member for Hammond Adrian Pedrick called for MPs to recognise the importance of the Gifford Hill development in particular to the regional job market and the racing industry.

"The Murray Bridge Racing Club Gifford Hill development is one of the most exciting projects underway in regional South Australia," he said.

"The project has stalled due to the lack of confidence from banks in regional projects, which is the exact reason this Government must provide funding support."

"This project has been ongoing for over 10 years and the Labor Government has provided little or no support."

Member for Chaffey Tim Whetstone and Member for Schubert Stephan Knoll supported the proposal.

"When we look at our jobless numbers and the pathetic jobs growth that we have had in South Australia since 2010, I would have thought that this is a very good and useful way to spend money," Mr Knoll said.

"This project ... would completely revitalise a community, a community that is extremely reliant on a couple of big players for its jobs."

Thrifty governments' argument goes back to 2012

TWO questions have been key to the 18-month diversification deadlock between Adelaide and Canberra: who will deliver the program, and will it affect the GST income South Australia gets from the Federal Government?

If the Federal Government gives the money to South Australia to spend, usual rules call for the State's GST income to be reduced according to a pre-existing formula. But if the Federal Government spends the money itself, or grants a special exemption, South Australia keeps its GST income and benefits from the diversification funding, too.

With both governments keen to pinch pennies, neither has been willing to give an inch.

The dispute began when then-Regional Australia Minister Simon Crea announced the \$100 million Murray-Darling Basin

Regional Economic Diversification Program in November 2012.

Mr Crea and his successor, Anthony Albanese, promised the Federal Government would administer the program, according to State Minister Geoff Brock.

In July 2013, Premier Jay Weatherill wrote to the next Federal minister, Catherine King, asking for the funding to be considered outside the usual arrangements. She announced a new list of funding recipients - including seven in the Murraylands - shortly before Labor lost the federal election.

In February 2014, Mr Weatherill signed a deal that appeared to lay his claim to rest: it specified that the Federal Government would provide the funding but not deliver the program.

But when Federal MPs wrote to Mr Weatherill and Mr Brock several times dur-

ing 2014, confirming the GST revenue would be reduced they received no reply.

When Mr Brock answered 10 months later, he suggested the Federal Government deliver the program directly or make alternative arrangements.

Federal MP and Assistant Minister for Regional Development Jamie Briggs replied, saying the alternatives Mr Brock had suggested contravened the national partnership agreement and, in some cases, the Constitution.

Mr Brock's one-line reply on March 14: "I acknowledge your letter ... and will consider your comments."

Mr Briggs wrote back on Monday to say the deal would soon be off the table.

"We will have no choice but to reallocate the funding so it can be delivered to those communities in South Australia that need it most," he said.

Not my fault: Premier Weatherill

A FIRED-UP Premier Jay Weatherill says there is "bureaucratic bullshit" in regards to the attempts to put conditions on a funding deal he says was reached in 2012.

Mr Weatherill said he had secured \$25 million in economic diversification funding for South Australia well before the announcement of the Murray-Darling Basin Regional Economic Diversification Program, which also covers Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

The funding was to be provided outside the usual State-Federal financial framework, he said, exempting South Australia from losing GST income.

"I was the guy in the room that did the deal," Mr Weatherill said. "I know what the deal was: I just want them to keep it."

"The change of government (in 2013) doesn't matter. Commonwealth governments are bound by the agreements they reach, and this is the agreement I reached."

When asked if his signature on a national partnership agreement last February meant he was now bound by the more recent deal, Mr Weatherill said no.

"They could still make it GST-exempt with the stroke of a pen," he said.

"I don't care how they could do it, but they could do it."

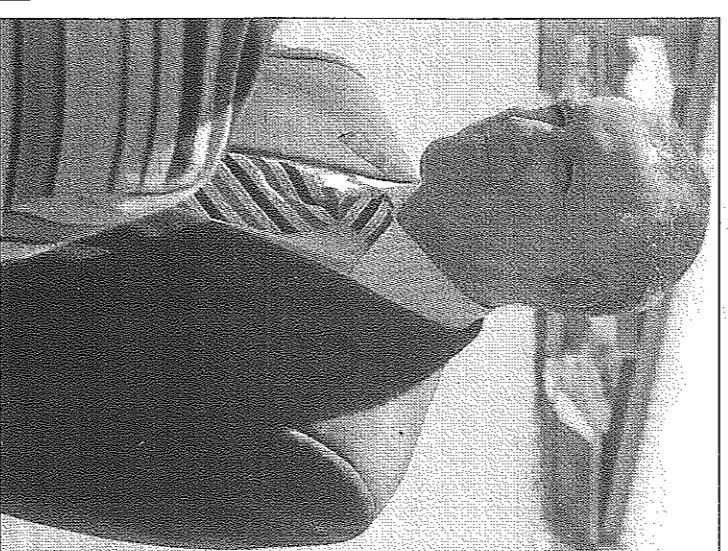
The other three basin states accepted the GST trade-off and began spending their diversification funding more than a year ago, but Mr Weatherill said his government had no intention of doing the same before May, when the Federal Government has threatened to withdraw the funding.

However, he suggested the projects that would miss out could be in line for some of the \$12.5 million in State regional development funding negotiated as part of his power-sharing deal with independent MP Geoff Brock.

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Disagreement: Premier Jay Weatherill resists any suggestion the dispute over diversification funding is the government's fault.

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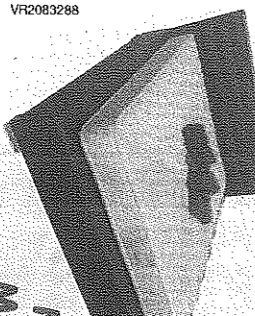
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