

All hail the grandiose prix

The Age Sport

By Greg Baum

23 March 2018 — 6:11pm



A Jim Pavlidis illustration.

Photo: Jim Pavlidis

At a function this week to mark the beginning of the AFL season, Victorian sports and tourism minister John Eren was slated to speak for five minutes and banged on for 18, pausing only occasionally to laugh about how long he was banging on for, until everyone in the room was scuffing their feet and looking at one another and wondering when or if he was going to stop. They had come to hear Chris Judd.

It is not unknown for politicians to lose their sense of proportion and propriety, nor their lackeys and instruments. In Melbourne this weekend, it becomes a veritable ague. That is because it is also grand prix weekend.

The grand prix is the acme of political brainwashing. When it comes to fake news, the Grand Prix Corporation makes Donald Trump look like an apprentice. Take this single statement in a story on its website acclaiming the success of last year's staging: "An estimated 296,600 fans attended the 2017 Australian Grand Prix, with an additional 7.314 million viewers nationally and 390 million viewers worldwide."

Let's work back down that grid ... 390 million viewers worldwide? Formula One itself claims only that many for its entire 21-race season. When Liberty Media took over operations from Bernie Ecclestone last year, it revised the figure down to around 350 million. So Melbourne's grand prix out-rates all the other 20 combined, according to the Melbourne grand prix. Taking into account time zones, resistance group Save Albert Park say the true figure is probably no more than 15 million.

Next, 7.314 million viewers across the nation? Let's go to the videotape: that's more than the AFL and NRL grand finals combined. So the Melbourne grand prix out-rated the most-watched show of the year, and another in the top five, all at once. Of course, TV networks and their partners use tricks to beef up their numbers; by one metric, a 15-minute cameo counts as a viewing. But when it comes to smoke and mirrors, the grand prix is the granddaddy of them all.



The Grand Prix has a problem with backfire.

Photo: Mark Wilson

Then there's the gate, nudging 300,000. Here, the Grand Prix Corporation is at its Goebbel-esque best. The figure, you will note, is round, jolly and estimated. That is because the grand prix does not count numbers through the gate. It is says that the cost of putting electronic turnstiles at seven gates, or even to issue a few hand-held scanners, is prohibitive.

This event, that claims to be worth \$1 billion a year to Victoria, cannot afford a headcount. This sport, which works to engineering tolerances measured in microns, and times itself in thousandths of seconds, can count crowds only in batches of thousands, estimated. All that rubber has a serendipitous upside of course: it means the grand prix folk can put out that the expected crowd this year at 370,000, and no one bats an eyelid.

Concerning the grand prix, it was ever thus. When it first arrived in 1996, Premier Jeff Kennett promised it would not cost the Victorian taxpayers a cent. Last year, it cost \$57 million in fees alone, and more than \$100 million all-up, as estimated by Save Albert Park. SAP has its own agenda, of course, but it does go over the accounts with a fine and forensic toothcomb. State governments of both persuasions go over them with fertiliser.

Former grand prix chairman, the late Ron Walker, once claimed the global audience for the grand prix was 54 billion, or nine-times the world's population. No one challenged him. In 2006, when he was challenged about the grand prix's gate figure methodology, that is, to count everything, including trees and passerby cars on Kings Way, and multiply by four, he said it was world's best practice. A dozen years later, it still is, evidently.

So it was that on day one this year, the gate figure as supplied by the Grand Prix Corporation was 53,500 (est), rising for no obvious reason 14 per cent from 46,000 (est) last year. Track-side, it looked nearly deserted (est).

We're not all the fools they take us for. Somewhere in his monologue, Eren said he had grown up in North Melbourne and once been a Shinboner, but now barracked for Geelong. At this, there was more and louder shoe-shuffling. It turns out that for the member for Lara and former member for Geelong Province, this was a political expedient, a stacking if you like. We don't (est).

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<https://www.theage.com.au/sport/all-hail-the-grandiose-prix-20180323-p4z5yc.html>;