“Cultural leadership is one of the most difficult parts of the job”

AFL boss Gillon McLachlan on racism, sexism and football’s other hotly contested issues

By Konrad Marshall
IT’S 8PM but already pitch black and freezing on the farm. It’ll hit zero overnight, on this fertile land a couple of hours west of Melbourne, where I’ve come to meet Gillon McLachlan. I’ve followed his directions – Turn off the highway near Moriac, down the Cape Otway Road, right-straight-left, through the two brick posts – and now I’m creeping along a track between ghostly cypress windbreaks, past a big dog barking at stars, reaching the converted woolshed where McLachlan comes to escape the exciting, inspiring, exasperating and unrelenting role he has filled for the past five years, as chief executive of the Australian Football League.

He’s expecting me but maybe doesn’t hear my Hilux stop, or my footsteps circling his Birregurra bolt-hole, because I round a corner and have ample time to study him through a tall glass door. The 46-year-old is alone, all 197 centimetres of him splayed on a couch by an open fire. He’s poring over scattered sections of the Australian Financial Review, sipping from the neck of a Stella Artois, and the moment I knock – my wedding ring rapping too hard against double glazing – he jumps in his seat, holds his heart and swears.

“I’ve been following McLachlan for almost a week now, observing him at the AFL’s Rising Star Awards yesterday, talking in his office the day before, and lurking at the presentation of the ceremonial All-Australian team a few nights ago at the Palais in St Kilda. As football royalty mingled in the theatre lobby, I could overhear him from a slight distance. “It’s been a really good year for footy,” he remarked to a commentator. “A great year.” Idle patter, but also truth. Judging by the stats, the AFL is enjoying a brilliant run during McLachlan’s sixth season in the top job. Memberships are at an all-time high (1.06 million across the league this year), as is attendance at games (6.9 million by the close of the home-and-away season). The average crowd (35,108 per game) is now the fourth highest in the world, behind only America’s National Football League, Germany’s Bundesliga, and the English Premier League. Locally, AFL crowds are more than double those of the NRL (34,000) – and more than triple those of soccer’s A-League (10,877). Ticket and food prices are low, while competition between the 18 AFL clubs is high. (It feels as though, on any given weekend, almost any team can win.) Fans are also enjoying the sweet spot of a colossal broadcast rights deal that McLachlan negotiated in 2015 with the Seven Network, Foxtel and Telstra, worth a staggering $2.508 billion over six years. Oh, and the AFL Women’s league he launched in 2017 has sparked a grassroots revolution, with a peak of more than 530,000 women and girls participating this year. And yet. Newer teams are failing to win over crowds, a heartland state like Tasmania still has no team at all, and that AFLW competition? It’s beset with issues. Not a day goes by when there isn’t a new AFL folly or furphy or failure for an army of pundits to lament with grave intonation: an imperfect score-review system; fans feeling “change fatigue” as their game is endlessly tweaked; mental health woes; concussion confusion; those bloody umpires. Most recently it was a pair of films about Indigenous champion Adam Goodes being booed out of footy back in 2015, including the underwhelming equivocation of the AFL at the time – and specifically, McLachlan.

He runs the country’s biggest sporting code, and the growth stats are impressive – but for AFL chief Gillon McLachlan, the thorny soft-power issues are proving hard graft.

Tough Call

by Konrad Marshall
was consequently muted and memorably stopped short by being weak, something you’d never have said of his. Darling’s documentaries on that heated time were released – Ian McLachlan well remembers the maelstrom that was opening the door.

“Because it’s very difficult to say anything in my role and not have people want to play the role of the evil guy. If you’ve been for this long, you just pretend about how each quote can play up. So it’s often a whole game of deception.”

We walk outside in the biting darkness, past a cluster of sheds and ute-ports. The verandah is warm. It’s the living room, the in-box, the carriage place of the family’s Jumbuck Pastoral Company, and a place you might recognise in public – long arms drawn nervously near his body, wearing a navy newsboy cap worn to the Warrnambool races, 3.31am Wednesday – he doesn’t sleep much either. “I really try to scone someone with a stab pass of the day. And like most leaders, he’s learning to think about his own vacuum.

“Andrew always thinks he’s central to everything.”

Carlton’s playing list for a brief time. Peers from his school days spent in the dust, drenching, shearing and mulesing sheep, marking lambs. Yes, they played polo, “but not good enough to play professionally, sitting on the grassy patch behind the MCG with hooks and shelves for riding boots and helmets. McLachlan, his love of sport evident, has the courage to revist his mistakes, and acknowledge that he was wrong.”

“I had a lucky upbringing.” 

“Fortunately, Gillon had the temperament to take it.”

“Singlet”, because he was always on their backs)

“A cattle crush for eight hours. “It wasn’t that long,” he says. “I’d offer a passing ‘Hey Gill’, but more often than not it’s because I’ve walked into the path of the family’s Jumbuck Pastoral Company, or in the case of the AFL, the game. And part of that was making the game accessible, prominent on the non-preferred side. That’s all.”

“Now that I think about it, the hot chips at the MCG are bloody for McLachlan, and Gillon (far right) are one of the most difficult parts of the role.”

“I really think about it, the game.”
Good Weekend. “He opened the outcome if it happens again,” ponders McLachlan. “I’m still not sure – broadly – how we can change the online, the opposite was deemed the only way for toxic oxygen they breathe. One month later, after Crows forward Eddie Betts prompted some commen business. A racist February social media post about importantly, making it cease – is a fiendishly tricky over. I believe the industry is better if we’re all working mentoring to be more collaborative with our clubs when I took they conflate the fact that we’re the biggest league and any way that they’ll want to gamble.”

says. “I think their maths is crap, so I take them to
with Tim Worner, who recently resigned as CEO of the FLX, a gelding he owns, trained by David Hayes, there’s his true love: a framed finishing-post photo of painting of a footballer – but look to the right and
1931 Melbourne Cup, White Nose. He has all sorts of art bathed in sunshine. Today he wears a pastel blue sports coat, slim grey khakis, brown suede loafers and a big
head sacrosanct – and remember, that wasn’t popular, search for a long time. And the diagnosis and assessment nature of success and failure in our industry, and the very visible binary bring people with me, and that’s not an easy balance.”

Demetriou says “legacy” is an entrenched mantra at the AFL, which is where a final criticism of McLachlan running the code: “It’s always deserved its own team, responsibility, so no one likes change – full stop – so my role, my says. “If you don’t have mechanisms and resilience down by the AFL, to the point he’s lost faith in those three per cent – not the first 97,” he says. “It’s the extra phone call, the small, the seating arrangement, what- ever?” Does what he does in these moments, though, when the footballer is not too tight? “Comparisons,” he says. “It’s very hard to maintain resilience and correction to do this job, don’t do it.”

Demetriou says “legacy” is an entrenched mantra at the AFL, which is where a final criticism of McLachlan emerges. If you believe in custodianship, then you also need to plan for succession. “You don’t want to have this tense,” Demetriou says. “I’ve said to Gill that he almost didn’t have a succession, and the AFL’s disavow, by not providing a succession plan.”

I mention this lack of a natural second- in-command and ask if or when he’s stepping away from the job, but the thrust of the question mandate McLachlan back into distance – his old game of shut down for the 17-year-old just starting, for my 12-year-old daughters. “It’s almost a new game, so I don’t even have this for ideas any years ago.”

McLachlan’s skill as a communicator is as spectacularly self-owned goal AFL is a short-format hybrid of the meat’s game, played on a rectangular field, promoted with branded clubs and wholesome, and – problematically – played at the pointy end of the AFL season, in a direct scheduling conflict. “They talk about creating new and empty air,” he says, “but for one of the families was their own new product,” says Race is an essential tool in business, and instead we get silver balls and light-up go-go boots.”

FLX, triggering increases of pre-match “entree” the steady transformation that the national draft into a televised event, and exhibition games in China to a grouped Americanas rules football, to the champions of some fans. McLachlan mentions there are always solid-strategic reasons. “We haven’t even discussed a rapidly changing market,” he says. “If you’re not appealing to new Auckland city, kids, Millennials, Indigenous people, women, to people in western Sydney and the Gold Coast, then you’re not talking to your whole team, and you’re not actually serious about growing and staying relevant and being the dominant sporting opportunity for everybody in Australia.”

Cheryl Critchley of the AFL Youth, who has worked with this woman for three years and now, there’s still work to be done. The

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