

SOLVING THE ANXIETY PUZZLE *plus* LIVING WITH A BEAUTIFUL MOTHER

# GodWeekend

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“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*



# TOUGH CALL

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.

BY Konrad Marshall

Gillon McLachlan (front and centre, in the white shirt) at an AFLX match, a 2017 innovation to the code.

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.

He's wearing faded Levi's, a blue hoodie and a respectfully muddy pair of Blundstones. The face of our national game, usually smoothed with foundation for television, is stubby and animated. His eyes are wild hazel orbs, and when he laughs the three lines on his forehead become six.

"Hey man," he says. "Get here all right?" (He says "man" all the time.)

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 (14,981) – 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.

All this brings into sharp focus the performance of the CEO, not so much on the staging of footy matches and the AFL's bottom line – which on any objective measure, he's nailing – but on the altogether more modern metrics around the soft-power component of his role. That is, his response to thorny cultural, societal and health issues, from racism and sexism to sexuality and more.

There was that Wednesday morning almost two years ago, for instance, when he stood under an AFL logo replaced with a prominent “YES” in support of marriage equality. To some, this was McLachlan as PC thug, “lecturing” and “bullying” footy fans. To others, it was exactly the kind of leadership expected from the head of the most popular sporting code in the country.

Then there was the 2017 drama in which he oversaw the resignation of two senior AFL executives, Richard Simkiss and Simon Lethlean, for “inappropriate relationships” with younger women employed by the league. Some likened AFL House to an episode of *Mad Men*, and noted the departures came only after the affairs became public; others whacked McLachlan for overreacting to relationships between consenting adults.

But perhaps the most high-profile of all was the booging that led Adam Goodes, a former Australian of the Year, to quit the game in 2015. In recent months, as two documentaries on that heated time were released – Ian Darling's *The Final Quarter* and Stan Grant's *The Australian Dream* – the AFL apologised unreservedly for not doing enough “to stand with him, and call it out”.

For many it was too little, too late. Far from being woke, the critics said, McLachlan had shown himself to be weak, something you'd never have said of his predecessor Andrew Demetriou, no matter what you thought of him.

“I was deeply distressed,” says veteran sports broadcaster and *Offsiders* regular Francis Leach. “It's not that it was malicious, but dodging the question of racism gave people comfort to avoid looking deeply. But also, what do you expect? Gill's never known the world not being built in his image. When would he have ever experienced being the outsider? Never in his life. That's not his fault, but his own world experience perhaps let him down in that moment.”

McLachlan well remembers the maelstrom that was 2015. He listened to all parties – those disgusted by the ugly, sustained attack on a champion, and the indignant who claimed that race was not involved. His response was consequently muted and memorably stopped short of calling the hatred by name: “There's a racist undertone,” he said, “but I don't believe everyone is racist.” It's a stumble he now regrets.

“I thought to myself, ‘Am I going to say that it's racism and create a whole new spot fire?’ I demurred, and I can understand why I did – I just wish I hadn't,” he says. “I think about it a lot. My realisation now is that sometimes you've gotta just call it out, and not nuance it and manage all these people. And I own that.”

Constant apologies over this have not gone unnoticed. At the All-Australian awards, whilst shadowing McLachlan, I spoke briefly to Aboriginal MC Shelley Ware, who quietly defended him: “I think Gill listens, and he has the courage to revisit his mistakes, and acknowledge that he was wrong.”

At times it's hard to know from where his world view springs: whether he's the bloke's bloke of the boardroom, drawing his \$1.8-million salary, or if he's still that kid who earned his pocket money shovelling horse shit on a farm in Adelaide. Is he the private-school polo player – or the local footy tragic? In truth he's all the above. And like most leaders, he's learning as he goes along, working out to what extent he should speak up on social issues. “Cultural leadership is one of the most difficult parts of the job,” he concedes. “We can't be the standard-bearer or moral arbiter of everything. But we're community leaders, and where we can take a stance, we should.”

Up close, McLachlan is pragmatic and funny – neither vanilla nor evasive – a hard thing to square with his public persona. Leach says McLachlan reminds him of those convivial politicians who turn into “Canberra robots” once the cameras are rolling. He's seen barracking over the fence at local footy grounds, clomping through the mud to the huddle, and attributes the difference between his public and private personas to the vacuum-sealed walls of the AFL HQ. “It's the Vatican on the Yarra,” Leach says. “This city-state that's a law unto itself, has cultural power, enormous political power, self-selects its cardinals from within – or from its parishes, the clubs. It forgives its heretics if they repent and it punishes opponents and outsiders. He's the prince of the hermit kingdom.”

The reigning prince is certainly that very tall person you might recognise in public – long arms drawn nervously near his body, wearing a navy pinstripe suit of armour, like a praying mantis. But he's also the guy I meet here at the farm, beer in hand, opening the door.



Above: then AFL CEO Andrew Demetriou and McLachlan in 2014. Demetriou says McLachlan should now be thinking about his own successor.

IT'S A great house, this woolshed turned weekend getaway. High ceilings with the original knotty cross-beams. A row of elevated bedrooms built into the old shearing stand. It's functional, too – with hooks and shelves for riding boots and helmets. McLachlan, his wife Laura and their four kids come here whenever

they can, which is, he says, “not often enough,” given the tonnage of weekend sport they watch and play. McLachlan's happy to show me around but uncertain why he's doing so. He's never done an extended profile interview of this sort. “I don't know how I'm here,” he says, seeming almost anguished. “I don't really like talking about myself.”

That's a consequence of the way his every utterance is magnified. He jokes that if he ever wrote a book the title would be *What I Really Think*. “Because it's very difficult to say anything in my role and not have people want to play the other side of it. If you sit where I've been for this long, you get so paranoid about how each quote can play out. So often it's a whole game of shutdown.”

We walk outside in the biting darkness, past a cluster of seven-foot-tall adolescent red oaks in the driveway, their roots wrapped in plastic. McLachlan has come for one night – to do some reading, sign some contracts – but before dawn he'll be alone outside, fighting with the final bitter frost of winter, to dig 15 holes and plant 15 trees in them. And maybe sneak in a ride on Twiggie or Bert.

He flicks a switch in the stable, the rusty industrial lights come on slowly – *tink, tink, tink, buzzzzzzz* – and there they are, a dozen or so horses in stalls, hooves in fresh hay. One of them takes a piss like a fire hose, and the steam rises up. “Getting away, this is the fun stuff. See down the end? A mare and foal weaning.”

This is one of the contradictions that emerge around McLachlan. In the lazy description of him, the word “toff” comes up. *Always*. He did grow up on a 2000-hectare merino and cattle property named Rosebank, in Mount Pleasant, outside of Adelaide, but he was also just a farm boy. “If you're not at school and it's light outside, it's time to work. If it's dark, you could come in,” he says. “I had a lucky upbringing.”

It's true that his uncle, Ian McLachlan, is a former National Farmers Federation president, a former chairman of Australian Wool Innovation and a defence minister in the Howard government, and that the wider McLachlan clan is the third-largest holder of private land in Australia, controlling around 5.75 million hectares. That's a land mass the size of Croatia, held under the auspices of the family's Jumbuck Pastoral Company, the vast majority of which is with other branches of the family tree. His wife Laura is from a monied background, too, being the daughter of wealthy industrialist Brian Blythe.

But as noted by McLachlan's younger brother, Seven Sport presenter Hamish, when people focus on the connections and trappings, they don't mention the

Left: Sydney Swans champion Adam Goodes during the 2015 season, when he was booed out of the sport without support from the AFL.

days spent in the dust, drenching, shearing and mulesing sheep, marking lambs. Yes, they played polo, “but only on the weekends, after we'd groomed for Dad, shod our own horses, cut our own hay for chaff, and broken our own horses in”.

School holidays meant being dropped off at an isolated sheep station and left with a manager for a fortnight. McLachlan's gap year after attending St Peter's College, an Adelaide boarding school, comprised jackerooing in the Riverina of NSW. (He was a bruiser, too; I once heard he'd locked Hamish's head in a cattle crush for eight hours. “It wasn't that long,” Gillon clarifies, “and he deserved it.”)

His mother, Sylvia, has described the AFL boss as “a serious child, always conscientious” with “a quiet strength”. His dad, Angus (whom his four sons called “Singlet”, because he was always on their backs) made uncompromising demands of his eldest boy. “I realise now those expectations were unfair,” he once said. “Fortunately, Gillon had the temperament to handle them.”

And so McLachlan became the stereotypical first-born. He lives in Prahran now, in Melbourne's inner east, and sees the same hierarchical treatment playing out with his own kids – Edie, 12, Cleo, 10, Sidney, 8, and Luna, 3. “The way the sharpness of those edges dissipates over time,” he says, “the second child different from the first, the third from the second, until the last is almost brought up by the other kids.”

He studied commerce at Adelaide University, then law at the University of Melbourne, living in at Trinity College. He played more than 200 games for Melbourne's Uni Blues, a top team in the amateur league, but was not good enough to play professionally, sitting on Carlton's playing list for a brief time. Peers from his uni days describe him as “sharp, with a streak of ruthlessness” and “a gentleman capable of being a rogue in the nicest way”. According to a former flat-mate, ex-St Kilda player and board director Andrew Thompson, McLachlan will not sparkle for the dull: “The only thing you don't want to be around him is boring.”

EARLY ON at the AFL, McLachlan used to skate-board to meetings, and in the office he still occasionally tries to score someone with a stab pass of the Sherrin. If the timing of various confirmation text messages to me is anything to go by – 2.33am Monday, 3.31am Wednesday – he doesn't sleep much either. “I really believe this life is playing ‘one night only,’” he says, “so I say ‘yes’ to everything I can socially, which means I might get there late or leave early, but I do it. I enjoy life.”

Ill at ease in front of a microphone, in other ways he's happy to draw attention, whether through his sartorial choices (including a notorious mustard jacket and white newsboy cap worn to the Warrnambool races), his undiminished fondness for playing competitive polo, or the lavish cowboys-and-indians-themed 40th birthday party he held here in Birregurra, shortly before he became CEO. The guest list included everyone from restaurateur Frank van Haandel to Magpies coach Nathan Buckley, legal eagle Justin Quill and breakfast radio king Ross Stevenson.

“It was a day for Gillon to be 20 again, or 30 again – just a fun day,” says publisher Geoff Slattery, a former colleague at the AFL. “He's actually happy-go-lucky – full of *joie de vivre*. I helped his wife Laura with her speech, and I remember the abiding theme was his sense of FOMO [fear of missing out]. He's a party boy.”

But of course, he's also a laced-up lawyer who ended up joining blue-chip Melbourne accounting firm Arthur Andersen (now Accenture) after graduating from Melbourne University. After two years there, aged 27, he was recruited to the AFL in 2000 by then boss Wayne Jackson, who was impressed not just by McLachlan's acumen but also his bond with footy, as a player and committee member for his local team.

“It felt like a massive risk at the time,” McLachlan says of swapping billable hours for ball-ups, “but I was

Below: the McLachlan brothers Hamish (far left) and Gillon (far right) played polo growing up.



Above: horses are in the blood for McLachlan, pictured at right, racing for the ball in a 2007 *The Age* Polo International match.

working with a steel distributor in Mount Waverley, bored shitless, so I was vulnerable. But the AFL was very different back then.” The revenue of the league was roughly 10 per cent of what it is today. McLachlan was seconded for two years as a strategic adviser, reporting to Jackson and attending AFL Commission meetings. “I felt like I had the best of both worlds – come and look and learn, and try to add value, but I had a return path if I wanted it.”

Two years passed. Andrew Demetriou put his feet under Jackson's desk, and he wanted McLachlan to stay. Before long the one-time lawyer was running the revenue, managing lucrative stadium arrangements, negotiating broadcast deals, and launching the digital publishing behemoth AFL Media. He became Demetriou's deputy in 2012, but club bosses already had the message: “If you want something done, see Gill.”

“SHALL WE grab a feed?” McLachlan asks. “We can try the pub in Birre?” We head out for dinner at the Royal Mail Hotel. Not the famed Dunkeld foodie destination, but the brick pub of the same name in Birregurra, 12 kilometres down the road from McLachlan's farm. My ute is full of crap, so we take his white Lexus SUV. We settle in the pub's front bar with the locals to watch the annual E.J. Whitten Legends Game, in which retired (and rotund) stars play a pantomime match for charity, and people mostly let him be.

In the time I spend with McLachlan, a few strangers offer a passing “Hey Gill”, but more often than not it's he who'll turn such moments into a chat about footy, whether with a security guard, barista or publican. At the pub in Birregurra a kid, maybe 10, approaches to ask if McLachlan has any footy advice. He answers as a former wiry ruckman. “There's two things you need,” he tells young Isaac. “Quick hands. And to practise your skills on the non-preferred side. That's all.”

I want to chat about the time the NRL came hard for McLachlan, in 2012. Now *Sydney Morning Herald* chief sports writer, Andrew Webster, characterised the manoeuvre as taking on “the monster truck” from the south. “Not only would signing McLachlan be a stunning coup,” Webster wrote, “it would also kick the AFL right in the *cojones*.”

Demetriou recalls the period. He'd given his deputy no guarantee he would be the next AFL boss, and so McLachlan kept relaying the bid he felt he was in, while weeks of heavy wooing continued from the

Australian Rugby League Commission's then chairman, John Grant. Demetriou laughs about the day he demanded a decision from McLachlan. “Gill was dishevelled. His hair was everywhere. He looked out of his brain! He was pacing around my office, and I'm not speaking at all – I'm just sitting there. He says, ‘Just say something – say anything! Just talk! Talk!’” So Demetriou painted a picture: “I want you think about a Saturday afternoon, driving out of Sydney... to watch Penrith playing Balmain,” he said. “And the following day, you've gotta go to Townsville... to watch the Gold Coast Titans against the North Queensland Cowboys.”

I tell this tale back to McLachlan, who nods, smirks, then rolls his eyes: “Andrew always thinks he's central to everything.” McLachlan was still unsure what answer he was going to blurt out when he walked back into Demetriou's office later that day. “But I loved the game, and that's what prevailed.”

Meanwhile, he was also the preferred point man for handling two of the biggest controversies in the game – the Melbourne Demons “tanking” fiasco (in which it was alleged the club made on-field decisions that would lead to losses and better draft picks), and the Essendon supplements saga (in which the Bombers were found to have systematically injected players with a banned peptide). McLachlan lost skin in both situations as sanctions were handed down and clubs, careers and relationships were left in tatters. “Being a regulator is one of the most difficult parts of this role,” he says. “You have to do it, but there's fallout.”

When he finally took over as boss in early 2014, those issues were still raw. Going to the footy was expensive, too, so that became the new chief's *raison d'être*. “I just think he wanted to restore the people's faith in the game, and part of that was making the game accessible, affordable,” says Richmond CEO Brendon Gale. McLachlan persuaded stadiums to drop food and beverage costs by 40 per cent and has held ticket prices for five of the past six years. Kids began getting in for just \$5, and completely free on “Sunday Funday”. Routine kick-to-kick after the game returned. “These aren't sexy issues,” says Gale, “but they're actually of great complexity – and of great importance to people.”

Now that I think about it, the hot chips at the MCG are good value at \$4.50 per salty box – but I still feel like I missed the memo. Getting cut-through on such issues is, McLachlan says, almost impossible. He hit the hustings hard, but suspects few listened. “I think Gough Whitlam

said, ‘You can only say three things at a time, and you have to say them for six months before you get heard.’”

**A** DAY earlier, we’re in McLachlan’s office adjacent to Marvel Stadium, overlooking a Docklands bathed in sunshine. Today he wears a pastel blue sports coat, slim grey khakis, brown suede loafers and a big black Oris diving watch. When he grows wary of a topic, he holds the water bottle he’s just drained against his skull and gazes into the middle distance.

That’s what happens when I bring up gambling. Stephen Mayne, the journalist turned shareholder activist, campaigns against the insidious creep of gambling into professional sport. The AFL is seldom out of his sights, whether due to clubs using pokies to prop up their finances or the fan experience of betting-ad bombardment. “The fans have made it clear they want out, but the AFL has sat mute. They have a deal with BetEasy worth \$10 million [a year], it’s up for contract this year, and the high road would be to not renew – but apparently that’s a bridge too far,” says Mayne. “It’s the one area where he’s failing to show leadership on social issues. But he’s a gambler, with a gambling heritage. I think that’s a problem.”

It’s true that McLachlan loves horses and racing, which is a familial passion. His great-grandfather, Hugh Patterson McLachlan, owned the winner of the 1931 Melbourne Cup, White Nose. He has all sorts of art on this office wall – including a Michael Leunig oil painting of a footballer – but look to the right and there’s his true love: a framed finishing-post photo of Extra Zero, a gelding he owns, trained by David Hayes, which retired two years ago after 109 starts, winning \$1.8 million in prize money. (He also co-owns a horse with Tim Worner, who recently resigned as CEO of the Seven Network. That one’s named Live and Free.)

Is his perspective on the peril of the punt inherently compromised? McLachlan talks first about “parental responsibility” with a reflection I’m not expecting: “I do the quaddie on Saturday afternoons with my kids,” he says. “I think their maths is crap, so I take them to task on their multiplication, but I have not one fear in any way that they’ll want to gamble.”

He also talks about “fiduciary responsibility”, and how the money the AFL makes through its partnership with BetEasy is reinvested in community football. “I do believe that when people point the finger at the AFL they conflate the fact that we’re the biggest league and have a wagering partnership with the fact that wagering has been deregulated.”

He believes the league’s gambling advertising balance is “self-regulated”, pointing to limitations placed on ads at games and on TV – and keeping bookmakers off most team guernseys. “We’ve been ahead of this,” he says. “Whether we’ve gone far enough is a fair debate.”

Debating is what McLachlan does best, if you believe the descriptions of his leadership style. The short version is that Demetriou, his predecessor, was a force of nature, a natural-born leader who shot from the hip, while McLachlan is a more consultative, consensus-seeking boss. “I said at the start I’m different to...” (He’s about to say Demetriou, but stops himself.) “I made a commitment to be more collaborative with our clubs when I took over. I believe the industry is better if we’re all working together. But that’s different from consensus.”

The Adam Goodes moment is, of course, a glaring example of the downside of decision-making via consultation. Yet responding to vilification – and more importantly, making it cease – is a fiendishly tricky business. A racist February social media post about Crows forward Eddie Betts prompted some commentators to suggest ignoring the trolls, denying them the toxic oxygen they breathe. One month later, after AFLW star Tayla Harris endured vile sexist abuse online, the opposite was deemed the only way forward: call it out, call it loud and call them by name. “I’m still not sure – broadly – how we can change the outcome if it happens again,” ponders McLachlan.

Rugby Australia boss Raelene Castle acted decisively when she sacked top player Israel Folau in May following anti-gay comments. Castle won praise in some circles, condemnation in others, and ended up in court. Despite the cost, she arguably showed the kind of moral leadership many expect from the head of the AFL.

“We’ve just gotta keep learning about how we should be dealing with all these issues,” is McLachlan’s summary of such situations. “And how we should be leading is part of that.”

On gender, it’s noteworthy that when McLachlan began as CEO, there was only one woman on the 12-person executive. Now three of his 10 direct reports are women. Liz Lukin (GM corporate affairs) recently stepped away for personal reasons, leaving Kylie Rogers (GM commercial), Sarah Fair (GM people) and Torres Strait Islander woman Tanya Hosch (GM social policy and inclusion). (“I can’t understand what it’s like to walk in the shoes of an Indigenous person,” McLachlan says, “but Tanya will put me in that position and take me there.”)

These appointments are changing the culture, albeit incrementally. Four hours after Crows coach Phil Walsh was stabbed to death by his mentally unwell son



in 2015, McLachlan had a choice to make about whether it was appropriate to play football that weekend. He had to balance “that instinctive male response” to soldier on, with the contrasting view of a number of his female staff, some of whom wanted to cancel the entire round. “And we ended up in the middle,” he says, “because of a diversity of people in our spectrum.” They called off the Adelaide-Geelong match – the first time a game had been cancelled in the history of the AFL. “We didn’t even cancel games in World War II.”

On the idea that he’s a straw-poll boss rather than a strong leader, McLachlan’s hackles are raised. “I don’t think there was any consensus about going out and supporting the ‘Yes’ vote on same-sex marriage,” he says, noting that some clubs contradicted the AFL position. “But in my gut, I knew we couldn’t limp into the issue. We didn’t just take a stance – we were unambiguous about our stance.”

There was no consensus when he stood up and launched a women’s league, either, he notes. The footy world had a vague notion that a women’s competition might surface around 2020. Then in 2015, McLachlan declared one would launch by 2017, putting it upon his stunned executive to deliver.

Above: Carlton star Tayla Harris has copped sexist comments on social media.

“He really went out on a limb, and I don’t believe his board were too happy,” says the woman known as “The Footy Lady” – former vice-president of the Western Bulldogs, Sue Alberti. “But he could see the pent-up frustration of women – and the strategic potential.”

Yet several issues won’t recede around the women’s league, most notably the pay gap, the blink-and-you-miss-it nine-week season, and the absence, until recently, of any kind of long-term growth strategy. “The truth is good leadership gets ahead of a problem, whereas I feel like we’re putting out fires and patching things up,” says broadcaster Emma Race, Hawthorn’s No.1 ticket-holder and host of the ABC Radio all-female footy podcast *The Outer Sanctum*. “He opened the genie’s bottle of women’s empowerment through sport, and you can’t put the lid back on.”

If “too many baby steps” is the major gripe of an impatient AFLW public, McLachlan offers a counter: “There’s a history of female sporting leagues, globally, falling over. And we’re determined that this is going to be sustainable. The speed of growth, expansion, is critical in that.” By next year there will be 14 AFLW clubs launched, and a three-year plan is being thrashed out this month. The AFLW system, he points out, has to be strong not only for a 30-year-old woman playing now, “but for the 17-year-old just starting, for my 12-year-old daughter, and the girl in 20 years’ time. This wasn’t even an idea five years ago.”

Enter what many characterise as a spectacularly self-indulgent own goal. AFLX is a shorter-format hybrid of the men’s game, played on a rectangular field, promoted with brash bells and whistles, and – problematically – played at the pointy end of the AFLW season, in a direct scheduling conflict. “They talk about creating fresh air and clear space for the women’s game, but one of the hurdles was their own new product,” says Race. “We need funding and viewers, and instead we get silver balls and light-up goal posts.”

**A**FLX, THE increasing blare of pre-match “entertainment”, the steady transformation of the national draft into a televised spectacle, and exhibition games in China point to a gradual Americanisation of Aussie rules football, to the chagrin of some fans. McLachlan insists there are always solid strategic reasons. “We have to be relevant to a rapidly changing market,” he says. “If you’re not appealing to new Australians, kids, Millennials, Indigenous people, women, to people in western Sydney and the Gold Coast, then you’re not talking to your whole market, 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 Fans Association gives the CEO a big tick for fan-friendly changes like curtain-raiser matches and the annual Pride Game, but marks him down for not including a fans’ representative on the AFL Competition Committee, an advisory group which meets to thrash out issues important to the code and includes presidents, CEOs, players, administrators and managers. “We’re the greatest single stakeholder in the game, but we’ve got no representation at all,” she says. “Shouldn’t we be part of the conversation?”

I mention this to McLachlan and he reaches for the top shelf of his bookcase, brings down a bulky report, then flicks immediately to one of many “brand track dashboards”, with page upon page of line graphs, most of which seem to wiggle encouragingly upwards. Forget woke or weak, McLachlan has more than a healthy dash of wonk. “You can listen to talkback radio, and read Twitter, but you also need to know

what *actually* is real in all that, rather than individual opinions or those of a specific group,” he says. “You need quant-based research and quality-based research, by market, by demographic, by hardcore supporters and broader supporters, every month, in every state.”

He goes to a lot of football, too, at all levels, and people there let him know what’s on their mind. “I get the most *passionate* letters, and the moment you ring them, they say, ‘I’m sorry, I just love my footy club.’ And I get that – I get that it’s emotional. But I know we’re going pretty well. The code’s in great shape.”

Let’s draw up a topic list.

The prospect of a night-time grand final, which gets raised because it’s better for TV, and therefore sponsors and advertisers. (The 2018 AFL grand final drew an average audience of 3.38 million, beating the NRL grand final with 3.03 million, but many suspect that if the AFL switched its decider to a night game, it could trounce the numbers of the northern code.) “It gets raised by the media. The fans don’t want it to change. It’ll be an AFL Commission decision, but I like a day grand final.”

Frequent rule changes: “Yeah, on the flip side you get a narrative about the game having too much congestion and being told, ‘You’ve gotta do something.’ The fans told us last year, through that detailed research, that their number-one issue – *number one* – was congestion in the game. No one likes change – full stop – so my role, my responsibility, is to make the right level of change and bring people with me, and that’s not an easy balance.”

Mental health in football: “It is clearly now the biggest issue from our playing group. It’s also broader, including staff and coaches. The very visible binary nature of success and failure in our industry, and the way it’s dissected every day, has a huge toll, and that’s a worry for me. It’s brutal, and people are breaking.” (The AFL recently appointed a mental health manager to work with a clinical psychiatrist to help AFL staff, clubs, players, umpires and coaches.)

Concussion: “I care. We care. We’ve invested in research for a long time. And the diagnosis and assessment we do is world-class. We changed the rules to make the head sacrosanct – and remember, that wasn’t popular, people railed against it. We’ve just got to make sure we’re

as progressive as we can be, and the best we can be.”

A team for Tasmania, a state which footy’s poet laureate, Martin Flanagan, says has been badly let down by the AFL, to the point he’s lost faith in those running the code: “It’s always deserved its own team, but the economics of it never added up,” McLachlan says. “But we’ve got a plan now. Get community football growing again, get the talent pathway producing AFL-level players, and the government have a task force looking to unify the state and make a pitch to the AFL. I’m hopeful that there will be a team in Tasmania at some point.”

Whatever the topic, McLachlan’s probably on a hiding to nothing. Richmond boss Brendon Gale – the man many industry insiders expect to one day take over from McLachlan – is fond of saying that no one barracks for the AFL. “There’s good currency in kicking the shit out of the AFL, and sometimes as clubs we do it because it masks our own inadequacies or errors of judgment,” Gale says. “It really is a thankless job.”

I do wonder how McLachlan copes. Back in Birregurra after our visit to the pub, he’s sitting by his fireplace, stoking the coals as they crackle – a nice, meditative start – but his wife has said that even here, there’s always a “cloud of subconscious thought” around him. “My job is to deliver for the industry,” he explains. “I care about this game. And if we want to win, then I can’t escape it, because it’s really important.”

Everyone on his team knows this. They see it made manifest, too, in the way he walks the room before every AFL function, checking seating arrangements. He did it before the All-Australian night, making sure this woman was sitting next to that woman, because one had flown in to see the other. “Success and failure is in the last

three per cent – not the first 97,” he says. “It’s the extra phone call, the email, the seating arrangement, whatever.” What does he do in those moments, though, when the footy public is out to get him? “I compartmentalise,” he says. “If you don’t have mechanisms and resilience and conviction 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 void,” Demetriou says. “I’ve said to Gill that he’s almost doing himself a disservice, and the AFL a disservice, 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 nudges McLachlan back into defence – his old game of shut-down. Ultimately, it’s impossible to know how many more bashing he wants to endure, or how many barnacles he wants clinging to his résumé, but right now, there’s still work to be done. The current broadcast deal ends in 2022, and the new one will probably need to be signed next year. (It’ll be much more

complex, too, as internet giants like Google, Amazon and Facebook show an interest in streaming sporting leagues around the world, and local free-to-air and cable TV stations attempt to become platform agnostic.)

Timeline aside, is there another public-facing role in his future? Another sporting body in need of a skipper? What interests him? “Sincerely, I don’t know,” he says, shrugging. “I like leading teams. I like working with people. I’m enjoying the role,” he says, pausing. He stays silent for a long time, then smiles. “I’ve gone back into my shell, haven’t I?” ■

“No one likes change, so my role, my responsibility, is to make the right level of change and bring people with me.”