

15 million at stake in fight for control of Collingwood board

By Jake Niall
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Collingwood's wish to gain \$15 million in state government funding has created a thorny issue for both the current board and presidential challenger Jeff Browne: the need to have three women on the club board to satisfy a government diversity requirement.

The Magpies have secured \$15 million from the federal government to fund a health and wellbeing research facility in partnership with Monash University, and they have pinned their hopes on gaining the same amount from the Victorian government to complete the research centre.



Collingwood director Jodie Sizer.

But in order to secure the \$15m, the club will have to satisfy a recent Victorian government guideline that mandates that the organisation receiving the funding has a minimum of 40 per cent women on their board.

Should the seven-member board be spilled in an extraordinary general meeting, club sources acknowledge that there is a real possibility that the members will not elect three women in an open spill - potentially jeopardising that \$15m in the short-term, until the club appoints the necessary quota of women to the board.

The current board has three women - including Dr Bridie O'Donnell, whose position on the board has to be ratified at the next annual general meeting, with ex-Australia Post boss Christine Holgate and the club's first Indigenous director Jodie Sizer filling spots.

Sources familiar with O'Donnell's selection have confirmed, too, that the Collingwood board were mindful of the Victorian government's policy on funding when they decided that the vacancy would be designated for a woman.

In the event of a spill of the board - or even the next election at the AGM in December, when Holgate and O'Donnell are up for election - Collingwood might find it difficult to ensure that three women - from either the Browne ticket, or the current board - are voted on.

Browne, the former Channel Nine boss and ex-AFL lawyer, is planning to have three women on his seven-member ticket if there is an EGM and spill.

Whatever the differences between Mark Korda's board and Browne, the two camps are certain to agree upon the need for three women on the board. Under Collingwood's voting system, there is no apparent way to ensure three women are elected in an open spill, besides a negotiated outcome before or after the vote.

Sources familiar with Browne's view of the female board issue said that if he becomes president, but Collingwood does not have three female directors due to the members' vote, he would approach the government and make a commitment to have three women as soon as possible.

Browne's view, the source said, was that the state government could still provide the \$15m in funding if the club had pledged to meet the 40 percent guideline for women on the board. Collingwood would be a rarity among Victorian AFL clubs if it reached 40 per cent female representation, and the AFL commission itself would not meet that objective at the moment, with only three out of eight on the competition board, including chief executive Gillon McLachlan.

Collingwood is planning for the health centre to conduct research on concussion and sleep, among other areas, in their partnership with Monash University. The club, having secured funding from the federal government, does not have a formal submission for \$15m with the Victorian government, but has had conversations with the state government and is known to be seeking the funding.

O'Donnell holds a position in the state government as a senior public servant and had to seek clearance from her employer to be appointed to the Collingwood board. At present, she cannot vote because she had not been a member - in the right category - for the required two years under the club constitution.