

MEDIA RELEASE

Sydney
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The Chairman of Football Federation Australia (FFA), Mr Steven Lowy AM, said today he did not intend to seek re-election when his term expires in November this year.

Mr Lowy said he wanted to foreshadow his intention now, ahead of the 30 September deadline for nominations, to create the best possible environment to break the looming deadlock among stakeholders about the formation of an expanded Congress and preserve the independence of the FFA board which is critical to the game's future success.

The Congress model proposed by the Congress Review Working Group can lead to the professional game and just two State Federations, acting as a bloc as they have done throughout the process, to control the Congress and therefore the election of directors to the FFA board.

"I want to get the focus back on the core principle and not on personalities," Mr Lowy said.

"By removing myself from the debate I hope to encourage a proper analysis of the real issues so that an outcome can be achieved that is in the interests of the whole of the game."

Mr Lowy said that when he was elected chairman by a unanimous vote of all members in 2015 the game was entering a new phase but remained fragile.

"FFA has championed efforts to expand the Congress and expand the A-League under a new operating model so it can maximise returns on investment for the game as a whole, including for the clubs," he said.

"This remains the goal of the FFA board – to grow the game so that the A-League and W-League, as well as our grassroots, football development, the women's game and our national teams get the resources they need to succeed here in Australia and on the world stage."

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For more information contact:
Adam Mark
Media and Communications Manager
Football Federation Australia
M: +61 409 390340
E: adam.mark@ffa.com.au

Full Statement of FFA Chairman, Mr Steven Lowy AM

Good morning ladies and gentlemen

As most of you are aware, my term as Chairman expires in November this year and I am obliged under the Constitution to be nominated for re-election to the board of FFA by the end of September.

Today I am confirming my intention not to seek re-election.

Why now?

The main purpose is to give the game every possible chance over the next few months to expand the Congress and at the same time preserve the independence of the FFA board.

The period ahead will be one of uncertainty and intense debate.

My choice was to wait until the last minute to announce my intention, or do so now and provide time and space for stakeholders to consider these momentous issues knowing exactly where I stand.

I want to remove from the debate once and for all any suggestion that the struggle to maintain an independent FFA board has anything to do with my personal interest or ambition.

When I considered standing for the FFA board in 2015 I spoke with each member of Congress.

It was understood that the independence of the FFA board was the defining feature of our governance structure and I received unanimous support to put my name forward to be a Chairman that acted independently in the best interests of the game in Australia.

My only interest was, and remains, to serve the game of football and the national interest.

But in making this announcement now, rather than waiting until the deadline, I want to make it clear that I would not, under any circumstances, wish to serve in a governance structure where independence was compromised.

The Congress Review Working Group has proposed a model that would do just that.

Acting as a bloc, as they have done throughout this process, the professional game and only two of the States could control the Congress and therefore the election of directors to the FFA board.

Being a member of the FFA Board requires directors to make difficult decisions, particularly about the raising and allocation of the game's limited resources, that at times will be unpopular with the professional game and various stakeholders.

The independence required to make these decisions is significantly compromised where the professional game has significant control over the appointment and removal of directors.

What's more, they could also effectively control the development of a separated A-League, blurring the roles of members and directors.

That has never been FIFA's objective. FIFA sought a greater level of democracy within the Congress, not to potentially hand control of the game to the most powerful vested interests.

For its part, FFA has formally submitted its objections as well as suggested alternatives to key aspects of the proposals, and we understand a number of State Federations have done likewise.

There are, therefore, three possible outcomes regarding a new Congress.

One is that the proposals of the working group do not receive the requisite 75% majority support from current members at an EGM, leading to a stalemate and further uncertainty.

The second possible outcome is that the working group proposals are endorsed by at least a 75% majority.

Under those circumstances I would not be prepared to serve as Chairman beyond November.

There is a third possible outcome – that stakeholders take a step back and consider fully the long-term implications of any decision.

That they agree on a compromise that delivers an expanded and balanced Congress, charts a course for greater autonomy for an expanded A-league, and which at the same time maintains a structure where the members of the FFA board can act independently in the best interests of the whole game, whether I happen to be chairman or not.

What does all this mean?

It means that yet again Australian football faces an existential question: how best to govern the game?

By vested interests or by a truly independent board?

Other football codes have faced the same question in the past – those who chose true independence flourish: just look to the AFL.

For the stakeholders who must determine the future in coming weeks I issue this warning: those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes.

To those who are tired of the debate and wish for an outbreak of peace so that the game can get on with life, I say: be very careful what you wish for.

So much of the debate about this struggle over governance has been woefully superficial and simplistic – treating it as a petty political fight.

This has obscured the core principle over which the game is divided.

The key principle is this - we shouldn't allow representation to be driven by money.

We should not move to a model where the money flows back automatically to where it comes from.

The fact is that the type of governance model advocated by our critics leads to the trading of political favours between a few individuals, who would then control the many.

Even though our game now has record revenues at FFA, it is a finely balanced ecosystem with too few resources.

When you allow vested interests to overwhelm the board debate it is inevitable that other deserving interests will lose out.

What you lose is a national approach – one in which all interests are balanced. That can't and won't happen if the commercial game overly influences who sits on the FFA board.

This is ultimately about national interest.

Not just in terms of ensuring our national teams and grassroots get the resources they need - but in terms of who controls it.

Let me be absolutely clear: we welcome foreign investment in our league. It is more than welcome – it is crucial.

But when it comes to the whole of our game it should not be controlled by foreign interests. That is what is at stake here.

Millions of Australians love our game and want it to prosper.

And there are many philosophies out there about how best to achieve that.

But no-one can deny that the principle of independent governance has been the fundamental reason for our success over the past 15 years or so.

Blue-chip corporate sponsors and broadcasters have faith in that model. As do the State and Federal Governments.

And it has delivered success on and off the pitch. It hasn't been without its setbacks and stumbles which must be expected in these early days of the game's reform.

But success is clear.

The Socceroos, champions of Asia, are one of just 12 national teams out of 211 in FIFA to have qualified for the past 4 World Cups.

The Matildas, current runners-up and past champions of Asia, are a top-10 ranked football team, and our progress in the women's game overall is world-leading.

And we have announced our intention to bid to host the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup.

The A-League was created, as was the W-League. And over the short life of the leagues, player salaries, club distributions, average crowds and memberships and club asset values have all grown, while club losses have substantially reduced.

The National Premier Leagues were created, and the FFA Cup was introduced – a truly unique competition in the Australian sporting landscape that unites the game from top to bottom.

The participation rate in our game continues to grow and is the envy of other sporting codes.

The success of the game over the last 15 years has not been easy. To achieve this success has required the board to make many difficult decisions about the raising of revenue and allocation of the game's limited resources, some of which have been deeply unpopular with various members or interest groups.

That can only be done where you have a board that is able to make decisions without regard to anything other than the best interests of football in Australia.

Stakeholders need to consider those facts carefully in coming weeks.

Let me finish on this point before I take some questions.

Our critics are fond of talking the game down. They say it's broken.

There is no question that our game has its challenges. It's far from perfect and much hard work lays ahead to fulfil our potential.

But no fair-minded person could say that the game overall is not in a much stronger place than it was 15 years ago, or even a few years ago.

We are now at a tipping point – the game can get stronger, or it could break if vested interests prevail.

The game has great momentum on so many fronts, but this can be seriously put at risk in a short space of time.

When I became chairman three years ago I said that the game had achieved an enormous amount in the 12 years up to that point.

And I am proud that the current FFA board and senior management team, and all FFA staff, have continued that work, often under very trying conditions.

But I said that the game we all love was very fragile, and that the gains of the reform era had to be carefully protected and built upon in disciplined fashion.

I argued then that the game was entering a new phase.

It needed to evolve and since then FFA has championed efforts to expand the Congress and expand the A-League under a new operating model, so it can maximise the returns on investment for the game as a whole, including for the clubs.

That remains the goal of the FFA board – to grow the game as a whole so that the A-League and W-League, as well as our grassroots, football development and national teams get the resources they need to succeed here in Australia and on the world stage.