

Luke Foley: Mike Baird's forced council mergers are a disgraceful rort

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[Luke Foley](#)

The boundary rigging involved in the New South Wales council mergers is the crudest act of gerrymandering since Joh Bjelke-Petersen



NSW opposition leader Luke Foley. Photograph: Matt Roberts/AAP

Mike Baird's forced council mergers are a disgraceful rort.

They are cloaked in the pious pretence of municipal efficiency, but the truth is their motivation is cynically political.

But don't just take my word for it.

Listen to what Baird's federal Liberal colleague, Nick Varvaris MP, has said:

After four years of what the state government dishonestly portrayed as consultation, Mike Baird has crudely rammed through amalgamations that will provide nothing but personal political benefit to a small cabal. The contempt that Mike Baird and the NSW Government have shown towards the electorate is nothing short of breathtaking and displays how out of touch they collectively are.

The [forced council mergers](#) were conceived and executed in ruthless political partisanship.

As a case in point, look at the Mid Coast Council where Baird appointed a former National party MP, John Turner, to replace the sacked councillors of the Gloucester, Great Lakes and Greater Taree councils.

Democratically elected councillors dumped and replaced by an apparatchik from the National party. It is an appalling abuse of power. Residents there are to be ruled by the National party whether they like it or not.

Across the state, citizens of 42 local governments had their elected councillors and mayors sacked and replaced by Baird's handpicked toadies. A further 23 local communities can expect the same treatment over the next few months.

The political nature of the mergers is also shown in the manipulation of the boundaries, which are the crudest act of boundary rigging since Joh Bjelke-Petersen's notorious Queensland gerrymander of the 1970s.

In the St George area, the three councils of Rockdale, Kogarah and Hurstville were actually prepared to merge. But Baird, who pretends that the mergers are about economies of scale and efficiency, rejected that reform proposal. Why? Simply because there are too many Labor voters in Rockdale.

To gerrymander the district the Liberals had to exclude Rockdale and merge it with Botany – even though these two communities are separated by the airport. The outcome is what Baird wanted – a Liberal gerrymander in the new Georges River Council.

The same rort has been pulled elsewhere. Granville has been part of the City of Parramatta since 1947 and there is no public interest in cleaving Granville from the Parramatta CBD. But Baird has done just that, purging Granville and its

Labor voters from Parramatta so that Sydney's second CBD (with all its lucrative development opportunities) can be gerrymandered for the Liberals.

Labor will not stand for this. The next Labor government will ensure fair boundaries for Parramatta and will provide a democratic opportunity for all communities to vote on demerging.

Even in those areas where the government has, at least temporarily, backed off, blatant political considerations were at the fore. All the mergers that were dropped just happened to be in marginal federal seats. At Kiama, the aim is to save the seat of Gilmore, at Hawkesbury the Liberals need to save the seat of Macquarie, and Walcha can thank Tony Windsor for making New England a marginal seat.

The reforms that local government needs are in the area of integrity. Developers should be banned from councils because of their manifest conflicts of interest and there should be caps on political donations and expenditure.

But while Baird is pushing on with the gerrymanders, it is telling that he is dragging the chain on integrity reforms.

In a parliamentary censure debate last week, I challenged the premier to bring forward legislation to have the caps on political donations and campaign expenditure in place for the council elections to be held this year.

I promised him support so that the reforms could become law on the next sitting day and apply to the council elections that will be held in September.

He did not reply. He says he wants to clean up local government – but not just yet. My tip is that he will delay this reform so that the Liberals can benefit from uncapped political donations one more time.

In Baird's world, there is always time for one more rort.

Luke Foley is the NSW opposition leader.

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