

Malcolm Turnbull's John Howard-induced headache on council amalgamations in Sydney's eastern suburbs

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Photographers Alex Ellinghausen and Andrew Meares are travelling with Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten. These are some of their key images.

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is in danger of being caught in a trap of John Howard's making, with calls inside his seat of Wentworth for the Turnbull government to ensure locals get a say on unpopular council amalgamations by funding a plebiscite vote.

In 2007, Mr Howard accused the Beattie state Labor government of "riding roughshod" over Queenslanders through forced council amalgamations.

Facing the loss of federal seats in Queensland, the Howard government passed a law allowing the Australian Electoral Commission to hold plebiscites on Mr Beattie's proposed amalgamations and Mr Howard promised the Commonwealth would pay for each one.

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Parliament as his "Democratic Plebiscites" amendment bill to the Electoral Act passed into law.



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at Omni tanker manufacturing business in south-west Sydney with local member Russell Matheson and minister Angus Taylor. Photo: Andrew Meares

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On Tuesday, Waverley Council - one of three local councils within Wentworth earmarked for merger by the Baird government - voted to hold an election day plebiscite.

The AEC has told Waverley that a plebiscite will cost \$350,000 to deliver.

Waverley Mayor Sally Betts, a Liberal who Mr Turnbull regularly describes as "the most powerful woman in the eastern suburbs" and works in his electorate office, opposes holding a plebiscite. She is widely expected to become mayor of the merged super-council in the eastern suburbs.

Waverley councillors who voted 6-5 in favour of a plebiscite were unaware Mr Howard's government had picked up the tab for 87 council plebiscites in Queensland in 2007 and are now calling on Mr Turnbull to do the same in NSW.

Waverley Labor councillor Ingrid Strewe said Mr Turnbull should honour his political mentor, Mr Howard, and back local democracy.

"We will ask Malcolm Turnbull, whose hero is John Howard, to pay for our plebiscite on election day," she said.

North Sydney Council, which has resolved to hold a plebiscite, and seven other councils currently taking legal action against forced amalgamations could also request the federal government pay up.

Mr Turnbull's office declined to answer a list of questions by Fairfax Media, including whether he backed Mr Howard's public stance on local democracy.

A spokeswoman for Mr Howard said everything he said on plebiscites in 2007 is on the public record but he had no comment on the NSW amalgamations.

It is understood Ms Betts will attempt to defuse the push for a plebiscite next week through a motion to rescind council's support for a vote.

A Liberal councillor who was overseas last week is expected to give Ms Betts the 6-6 result to allow her to cast her deciding vote against a plebiscite.

If neighbouring Woollahra Council loses its legal challenge against its amalgamation with Randwick and Waverley, it is expected that the NSW government will quickly move to amalgamate to head off any more protest inside Wentworth and elsewhere as the tight election campaign heats up.

Some Coalition MPs have taken positions against Mr Baird. The Liberal MP for Barton, Nikolas Varvaris, recently accused the Premier of displaying "breathtaking contempt" for the community on the issue.

The NSW government abandoned plans to merge Kiama and Shoalhaven councils after 50 per cent of locals turned out to vote in a plebiscite that found 95 per cent of voters against amalgamation.

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2016/malcolm-turnbulls-john-howard-induced-headache-on-council-amalgamations-in-sydneys-eastern-suburbs-20160519-goz3py.html>