

# Amalgamation issue just won't go away

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*Peter Primrose – Not happy, Gladys*

The NSW Government's disastrous council amalgamation plans, abandoned after public outcries and legal challenges, remain an issue to many in the state.

The Labor Opposition says that the Government still has a hidden agenda, and many councils who spent millions of dollars on preparing for amalgamations are still trying to get compensation.

The issue has been an unmitigated disaster for the Berejiklian Government, and a case study in how not to conduct public policy. It has shamelessly broken promises, hidden key information from public view, and treated councils and the public like fools.

The State Opposition's local government spokesman, MLC Peter Primrose, took the State Government to court to attempt it to release details of the \$400,000 report from consultants KPMG, which supplied much of the justification for the mergers.

They were supposed to save NSW ratepayers \$2 billion over ten years, but the details of the report were never made public, and the Government continues to fight to keep it secret. Before Christmas the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal handed down its decision in *Primrose v NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet*, with swathes of the decision rendered 'not for publication', which rather confirms the validity of Mr Primrose's case.

"The NSW Liberal-Nationals Government have again used public money to hide its secret report on forced council mergers from public scrutiny," he said. "This is despite Premier Berejiklian and Deputy Premier Barilaro repeatedly claiming – as they did before the last election – that forced council mergers are no longer on their agenda."

Given the Government's track record, it is hard to believe them. Three successive Liberal Premiers – Barry O'Farrell, Mike Baird and Gladys Berejiklian – have broken promises on amalgamation. The Government has no credibility on the issue. Mr Primrose may be playing politics, but he has a point.

“If the NSW Liberal-Nationals are really no longer pursuing forced council mergers, why are they still going to these extraordinary lengths to keep their KPMG report a secret? The only conclusion to draw is that the NSW Liberal-Nationals Government are not finished with forced council mergers, and those documents show that there is a Phase 2 of forced mergers still to come.”

The record shows that anything can happen.

If you want to read a decent analysis, you should read [this excellent piece](#) from Australian Public Law. It was written by PhD candidate Lynsey Blayden, and published in November 2017. It is called '[Council Amalgamations in NSW: A Study in How Not to Tackle Hard Policy](#)', and forensically dismembers the Government's ill-advised amalgamation strategy.

She is particularly critical of the Government's reliance on the KPMG report, making the point that paid consultants are unlikely to provide impartial advice. Her article should be required reading for everyone involved in the shemozzle. It is a fine piece of work.

The Berejiklian Government is only a little over a year away from facing an election. The thorny issue of council amalgamations may yet be the issue that brings about its downfall.

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