

Mike Baird brushes aside council backlash as Liberal lose seats across Sydney

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Premier Mike Baird has brushed aside swings against Liberal candidates at Saturday's local government elections, even as numerous candidates said state policies such as council mergers and the greyhound ban were factors at polling booths.

Candidates both victorious and unsuccessful said voters had reacted against a general sense the government was not listening, and was imposing policies in an autocratic style.



*Councils 'pushing agenda' on mergers: Mike Baird NSW Premier
Mike Baird says some NSW councils are 'putting their own agenda' ahead of long-term interests by resisting amalgamations.*

"People weren't happy with the fact some of these things were just being pushed through," the Liberal candidate for Liverpool mayor, Tony Hadchiti, said of the council merger and greyhound policies.

"Some people weren't affected by greyhound racing, it was the way that that was being handled," said Cr Hadchiti, who conceded that Labor's Wendy Waller would win the mayoralty.



Tony Hadchiti, Liberal candidate for Liverpool mayor, has conceded to Labor. Photo: Simon Bennett

"Any leader who's elected needs to ensure that they take the people with them," Cr Hadchiti said.

"A lot of people are feeling that they are not being taken along on the journey with some decisions."

Labor candidates, who enjoyed strong polling in a string of southern, western and northern Sydney councils, also said a backlash against Mr Baird had been key to their success.

"I was amazed at how many state issues came up," said Labor councillor Barry Calvert, who has served on Hawkesbury Council for more than 16 years.

Amalgamation was a "big issue", said Cr Calvert, even though Hawkesbury had staved off a threat of amalgamation with the The Hills Shire.

But "the axe is still hanging over our head" Mr Calvert said, with Local Government Minister Paul Toole saying in May that Hawkesbury's "long-term future requires further consideration".

In Blacktown, where Labor expanded its tally to 10 seats from a possible 15 as an 11th seat remained in reach on Monday evening, former mayor and Labor councillor Stephen Bali said the greyhound issue had been "fairly prominent".



Blacktown Mayor Stephen Bali is still waiting for a meeting with the Premier.

The district had a lot of "mum and dad" greyhound owners who were upset the industry "wasn't given an opportunity to clean itself up", he said.

With around 350,000 residents, Blacktown is Sydney's biggest council, but Cr Bali said he had been unable to secure a meeting with the Premier for 18 months.

"The state Liberals for whatever reasons want to ignore the local councils," he said.

With vote-counting to continue throughout the week, Mr Baird attributed to the loss of seats to a natural decline in Liberal support after a strong 2012 election result.

"Certainly in terms of the results, yes there has been some areas where the vote has gone backwards but there is a range of reasons for those," the Premier said.

"[W]e were at a very high level back in 2012 so it's not unexpected that there has been some drop in vote."

The once-Labor heartland of southern Sydney, which is now dominated by Liberals at state and federal level, has also undergone a red resurgence in The Shire, where preliminary results showed a knife-edge outcome.

A hung council is now expected at the Sutherland Shire Council, with the Liberals' 11-seat tally tipped to be depleted to seven after counting is finalised. Labor is also expected to pick up seven seats, handing former Liberal-turned-independent Steve Simpson the balance of power.

But Cr Simpson played down his kingmaker status.



Labor candidates said a backlash against Mike Baird had been key to their success. Photo: Edwina Pickles

"I'm just one of 15 [councillors]. I hope that we will all work together."

Unlike other Sydney councils, the shire's result was confined to local issues, namely the "backlash against the perception of over-development", he said.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/mike-baird-brushes-aside-council-backlash-as-liberal-lose-seats-across-sydney-20160912-grehqy.html>