

Mike Baird delays council polls at cost of lost trust

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MARCH AGAINST MIKE TARGETS BAIRD

Thousands of protesters gather at Sydney's Town Hall to rally against a host of Mike Baird's most controversial policies.

- Baird ordered to reveal KPMG's role in mergers
- Government push for mergers suffers setback

Mike Baird should bring forward elections for councils he has sacked. Governments come up with all sorts of excuses for all sorts of silly stuff. But the excuse offered for not holding elections for another 15 months is tenuous even by the declining standards of these things. More on that later.

First, what to make of the swirl of hostility around #CasinoMike that found expression in a rally attended by thousands on Sunday?

Some were there to protest the demolition of Windsor Bridge in Sydney's west. Others were angry about coal seam gas, attacks on the city's nightlife, WestConnex, sacked councils, or trees razed for Sydney's new tram. A diversity of local concerns swelled the crowd.

But many there believed there was a common thread animating the mood.

That was the view the Baird government was advancing moneyed interests over the interests of regular people. In doing so, the government was probably corrupt. This perception was codified in the posters that promoted the March Against Mike: "Stop the Corruption," they said.

This perception raises a number of questions, but let's focus on two. One: is Baird corrupt? Two: what should Baird do, if anything, in response to the perception?



Illustration: Dionne Gain

The history of NSW – from the Rum Corps, to the Wild Men of Sydney like William Willis and Paddy Crick who used state land as a colonial credit card, to Robert Askin, to the recent rogues of Labor and Liberal hoist on the Independent Commission Against Corruption's petard – suggests one should be cautious ever claiming Macquarie Street is clean.

But with regard to question one: not only is there no evidence of corruption relating to Baird, but there is not even a specific allegation.

Any evidence offered on Sunday of Baird's alleged corruption amounts to corruption only if that word is stripped of its regular meaning. It's not corrupt to sack councillors. That is allowed under the Local Government Act. It's not corrupt to build a motorway. Nor is it corrupt to hire companies to work on a project's financing and construction. It's not corrupt to chop down trees for a tram line. It's not corrupt to implement anti-violence laws.

This is not to say there are not good arguments against these policies. And it is not to say that the hostility to Baird does not reflect a genuine and justifiable feeling of disenfranchisement about the actions of his government and others. But many of his policies can be explained by reasons other than attribution to a pan-government-corporate agenda to quash human vitality.

It is questionable whether building a new motorway is appropriate in an inner city rapidly becoming more dense. But WestConnex represents a series of projects road builders have wanted for years.

The tram line similarly represents a much discussed attempt to replace CBD bus transport with something more efficient and pleasant. There seems little doubt contractors have been insensitive in their design, but the history of the line offers no evidence that it is being used as a Trojan horse for development on public land.

In fact, government developer UrbanGrowth is trying to revive the idea of a metro to the east so it can justify apartments not justified by the tram.

So what of the second question: what should Baird do in response to the outcry over his recent actions? According to the men who see in the Premier a leader in their own image, not much at all.

"He's obviously the first strong reformist leader" in recent times, says Nick Greiner, the former Liberal leader who struggled to conceal his frustration at Barry O'Farrell's more plodding ways.

"And that is a bit of a change when you have had two decades of doing little or in some cases doing nothing," says Greiner.

"But I think [Baird's] got a huge amount of political capital and I don't think he's chewed up a great deal of it."

A similar view is offered by Jeff Kennett, the former Victorian premier who Baird recently invited to address his cabinet.

"There is no gain without some pain," says Kennett.

"What's our greatest criticism of the federal political scene for the past decade?" he asks. That it doesn't do much, he answers.

"You can't say that about Mike Baird."

Bolstered by the believers, the temptation for Baird is to ignore those put out by his policies.

He was, after all, elected with a mandate that did not preclude council amalgamations, and which expressly did include the construction of motorways, tram and train lines. National figures on Wednesday demonstrated the economic success of his construction agenda.

But there is a reason for him to be attuned to emerging local anger, which goes beyond the risk of suffering the sort of electoral decline that befell Kennett and Greiner. That reason is because of the nature of the things he wants to do.

Particularly relating to urban development.

Because there are good arguments in favour of more housing in parts of Sydney. The trouble is that delivering developments in a decent and attractive way will be so much harder if the perception catches on that communities cannot trust Baird.

And attempting to paper over disquiet about development does not work. Baird's Planning Minister, Rob Stokes, wrote a PhD on this.

"Using meaningless participation as a facade to cover over disagreement merely clogs up conflict, creating a dam of resentment, which spills over in the form of increasing litigation, loss of trust in politicians and administrators, and poor planning outcomes," Stokes wrote.

Which is exactly what will happen if the government attempts to ram through development projects while councillors remain in the cold. The delay in holding new elections will only foster a suspicion already growing.

And as to the excuse for not holding new council elections until September 2017?

The government says it is because the electoral commission said that would be its preference. Well Baird's the boss. He can tell them to do it earlier.

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/mike-baird-should-accelerate-council-elections-or-the-trust-will-fade-away-20160601-gp8zky>