

Baird's inner circle has started to believe their own BS

The Daily Telegraph August 31, 2016
Andrew Clennell

ONE of the biggest criticisms from within government of Mike Baird is that his inner circle contains no one elected by the people.



When it comes to day-to-day advice, it is not Treasurer Gladys Berejiklian, Deputy Premier Troy Grant, Planning Minister Rob Stokes, Finance Minister Dominic Perrottet or Transport Minister Andrew Constance he consults (people who could lose their seats and have to meet everyday punters), but his coterie of advisers, mostly from the north shore and northern beaches.

Among this bunch is chief-of-staff Bay Warburton, director of strategy Nigel Blunden, communications director Imre Salusinszky and social media adviser — or, as powerful 2GB broadcaster Ray Hadley says — hipster Tony Story.

Also becoming more and more important to the inner circle is former editor of The Australian Clive Mathieson, plucked by Baird straight from News Corp HQ in Holt St.

The problem for this group is, if you'll pardon the French, that they've begun to believe their own bullshit. And they are pretty much all from parts of Sydney where Baird is never going to struggle to win a vote.



Premier Mike Baird / AAP

By contrast, Labor leader Luke Foley has got himself a gun chief of staff, Chris Willis, the respected former Sydney news director for Channel 7. This bloke knows from looking at minute-by-minute ratings what worries the punters in the west and what pushes their buttons.

I wrote in this column a couple of weeks ago that the personnel in Baird's office needed to change, that there needed to be a cabinet reshuffle. Well, that reshuffle has to be pronto because this administration needs a shot in the arm.

The handling of the Bankstown Hospital tragedy report on the weekend was, yet again, highlighted by mistake after mistake after mistake.

First the government put up Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant, rather than the minister. Only when it became clear the minister was going to be smashed for this did she appear.

Then, in remarks to this newspaper, Baird said Ms Skinner was one of the "best health ministers" NSW has ever had.

Oh no. Can someone stop these people blowing themselves up?

It's a bit like one of those days where things keep going wrong, except it's not just one of them. I mean, they've got the biggest transport infrastructure projects getting built in Sydney's history, yet they are in political trouble.

The word is Dominic Perrottet will go to Health, which should really test the young Finance Minister but shapes as a good change-up.

The big stumbling block for any reshuffle is the Nationals. With Grant having copped so much grief over greyhounds he now needs the people who were being talked about as moving on — upper house leader Duncan Gay and Nationals deputy leader Adrian Piccoli — to stick around to prop up his position.

Yesterday Baird ended up where he started as Premier, apologising for former colleagues rorting donations before the 2011 election.

Aside from reversing the decision on greyhounds, which I doubt will ever happen, the only way Baird can turn things around is if the government works harder to show the good and popular things it is doing.

It's simple really. Change the narrative. Make some changes you have been planning for a while and turn them into positives. Announce that new Western Sydney hospital, get on with the Nepean Hospital upgrade. Tell us what the next big transport project is.

Daily Telegraph letter writers are belting the government over the greyhound ban. Letter writers in more Newtown-focused publications are complaining about the destruction of 100-year-old fig trees. Cabbies complain about the lot.

Yesterday Baird ended up where he started as Premier, apologising for former colleagues rorting donations before the 2011 election. He can get away with that because, unlike Barry O'Farrell, he did not win the 2011 election and dumped those being named and shamed at ICAC when he hit office.

Ironically, given the events of yesterday, it was in May 2014 when Baird sacked Mike Gallacher as police minister that he really looked like a cleanskin and his ratings could not have been higher. Yesterday, he was saying he was not about doing popular things but doing the tough things.

Really? So what the public wants does not matter? Is this a democracy or not?

Who would have thought even two months ago that Labor were any show in the 2019 election?

Who would have thought you could build \$40 billion worth of infrastructure and still be in electoral trouble.

And the turnaround in fortune all began with the decision to ban the greyhound industry.

Announced by a smiling Mike on Facebook.

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/bairds-inner-circle-has-started-to-believe-their-own-bs/news-story/f46e0f1af6424dd33ee8e295b01f3aec>