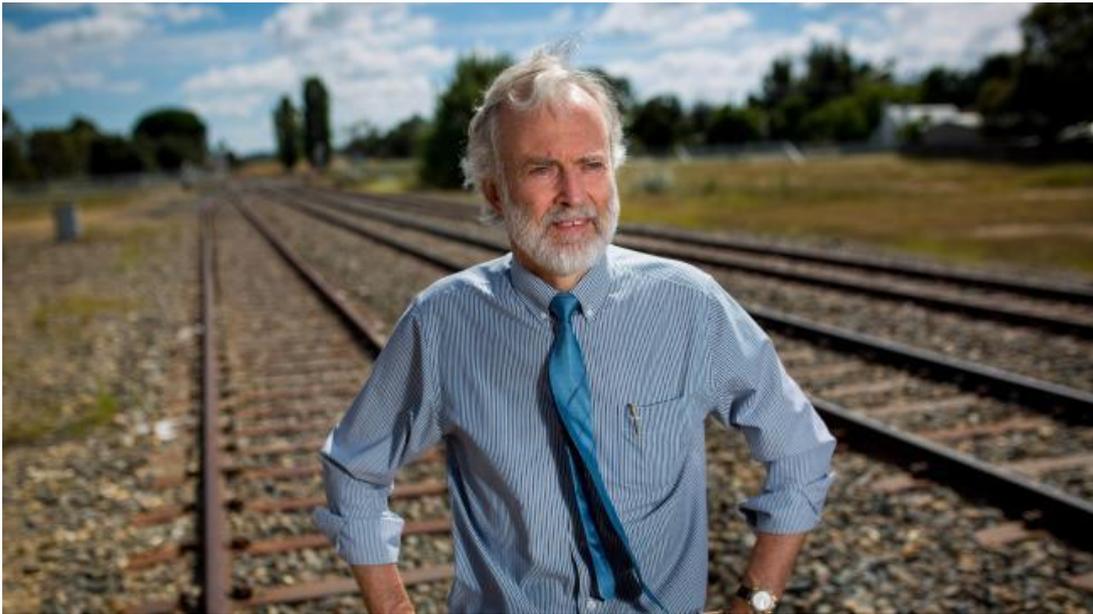


Marginals, Barnaby Joyce seat left alone in Baird's council mergers

THE AUSTRALIAN
MAY 13, 2016
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*Peter Harrison says Palerang residents fear Queanbeyan town will swallow their rates.
Picture: Stefan Postles*

The Baird government has ignited a storm of protest which could spill over into the federal election campaign with a decision to proceed with 19 council mergers, but has given Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce a reprieve by refusing to proceed with one amalgamation in his seat of New England.

But the state government has placed a potential bomb under the Coalition's campaign by proceeding with mergers in a number of marginal seats, including the bellwether Eden-Monaro, and Dobell and Robertson on the NSW Central Coast.

In Eden-Monaro, held by the Liberals' Peter Hendy on a narrow margin, the government has, among other mergers, approved the joining of the rural Palerang council with the Queanbeyan town council.

Former Palerang mayor Peter Harrison says his former council is a poor fit with Queanbeyan given the different demography. He says locals fear their rates will be consumed by Queanbeyan and that there will be less money for maintenance of local roads.

“Palerang is quite unique. The majority of people live in rural residential areas. It does not have urban centres,” Mr Harrison said.

The Baird government dumped a proposal to merge the Kiama and Shoalhaven councils, affecting the marginal seat of Gilmore, held by the Liberals’ Ann Sudmalis, and another affecting the seat of Macquarie, held by the Liberals’ Louise Markus, after a government-appointed delegate recommended against it.

It ignored its own proposal to merge Tamworth and Walcha councils in New England, where Mr Joyce is battling former independent MP Tony Windsor.

Deputy Premier Troy Grant said he had two calls from Mr Joyce about the amalgamations, but denied he had an influence.

Delegate Amanda Chadwick recommended Walcha and Tamworth councils merge, and the proposal was supported by the Boundaries Commission.

Mr Baird denied that the decision not to proceed with some of the mergers was driven by political considerations, saying it was purely a matter of what was in the interest of ratepayers.

The mergers will reduce the number of councils in NSW by 37. The number of councils in Sydney is to be slashed from 43 to 25. Yesterday the government sacked all councillors in merged councils, appointing administrators in their place, and delayed local elections in - affected areas until September next year.

Mr Baird said he had “absolute confidence” the mergers would result in better outcomes for ratepayers.

But the Baird government limited the financial benefits of the mergers by demanding the new councils not sack any workers, except executives. Employees in towns smaller than 5000 are permanently protected.

Opposition leader Luke Foley said the government had committed the greatest act of boundary jiggling since Joh Bjelke-Petersen ruled Queensland. A future Labor government would allow amalgamated councils to de-merge if there was community support, a position supported by the Greens.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/federal-election-2016/marginals-barnaby-joyce-seat-left-alone-in-bairds-council-mergers/news-story/82eda2c39b95eddf0edf49a3d438ad5f>