

NSW government votes down plebiscite bill, but warned forced council mergers will continue to hurt

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Shooters, Fishers, and Farmers' Orange MP Phillip Donato said "There can be no cost put on democracy" in reply to concerns about 20 merger plebiscites.

A Bill that would have given forcibly merged councils a vote on their future was knocked on the head by the Government today – who deemed it an opportunistic “hoax” by the Shooters, Fishers, and Farmers Party.

In turn Liberals and Nationals MPs were told they were “bleeding to death” over forced amalgamations, and that they “hadn’t learned a thing” from recent swings against them at the polls.

“The contempt continues in the bush – The member for Orange is evidence of that,” Labor’s Greg Warren said during this morning’s debate.

“We got thrown out of government and that’s exactly what is going to happen to you.”

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Premier Gladys Berejiklian.

Resuming a debate from August, government was scathing of the Shooters' Local Government Amendment (Amalgamation Referendums) Bill.

The Bill, which was ultimately voted down 47-37, proposed giving residents in 20 forcibly merged councils a plebiscite on whether they wanted to remain amalgamated.

Amendments from the Greens also pushed for a referendum for future merger proposals.

Government maintained the Bill was poorly drafted and opportunistic.

Coalition MPs said it ignored the cost of plebiscites across the state, that it would undo good work in already-merged councils, and that it would place an unnecessary burden on the NSW Electoral Commission.

In reply Shooters' Orange MP Phillip Donato said "There can be no cost put on democracy."

Liberal Albury MP Greg Alpin acknowledged mergers in communities such as Tumbarumba remained contentious.

But he said the Bill would open the door to councils being hijacked by local feuds and conflicting interests.

He said, ultimately, the Bill was a ploy by the Shooters to use the regions to score political points in Sydney.

"(It presents) a theme park of hazards to mire any small council area," Mr Alpin said.



Byelection polling crowd at Cootamundra High School at the weekend.

Last year government created 20 new local councils from about 45, including several in regional areas.

The process – and justification for the move – has been controversial, and something Opposition and crossbench say has fuelled swings against government in recent byelections.

Forced mergers were a millstone around government's neck when The Nationals lost Orange to Mr Donato and the Shooters last year.

One of Deputy Premier John Barilaro's first tasks upon taking over from Troy Grant was winding back pending mergers in the bush – including in the Central West, Upper Hunter, and Northern Tablelands.

At the weekend The Nationals retained Murray and Cootamundra – albeit with a 15 to 20 per cent swing against primary vote.

In Gundagai, where forced merger with Cootamundra was very unpopular, The Nationals received just 10 per cent of the primary vote.

Mr Donato said government had failed to properly fund some councils through the merger process and that it had more mergers up its sleeve.

Labor again demanded government release the full KPMG report it used to justify the mergers.

“I will point out Labor is not anti-amalgamation,” said Labor MP Greg Warren.

“We are anti forced amalgamation. Because that is what has outraged many communities and rightly so.”