

# Can Mike Baird's brand be rehabilitated?

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Sean Nicholls

**Two major polls have confirmed a sharp fall in support for the NSW government – and showed just how closely tied Mike Baird's brand is to its fortunes.**

Last month's Fairfax/Reachtel poll had the Coalition and Labor at 50-50 on a two-party preferred basis – a four percentage point shift away from the government compared with the March 2015 election result.



## *I'm no totalitarian: Mike Baird*

*One year after his election victory, NSW Premier Mike Baird says he has responded to concerns raised over the WestConnex motorway and Sydney's lockout laws.*

More astonishing was the preferred premier result which showed opposition leader Luke Foley pipping Baird by 51-49.

Thursday's Newspoll confirmed the two-party preferred figures with a result of 51-49 in favour of the Coalition.

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While there is a huge gap on the question of preferred premier – 42 to 24 per cent in Baird's favour – a significant 34 per cent remain uncommitted, giving Foley every opportunity to win them over

**Far and away the most devastating numbers for the government were those rating Baird's performance, which have slipped into negative territory for the first time.**

It's no secret that the government is in a rut.

In recent weeks there has been a lot of focus on the decision to ban greyhound racing from July next year, amplified by a looming byelection in Orange which has the Nationals under pressure.



*NSW Premier Mike Baird is facing a fall in popularity. Photo: Michele Mossop*

But it's obvious that the problem is far more widespread than that single issue which only directly affects a relatively small number of people.

**The real problem for the government is that the decision has strengthened a particular view that it is governing without listening – one set in train by other contentious decisions such as council amalgamations and the lockout laws.**

**This in turn is being tightly associated with Baird's personality – the clean-living Christian from Sydney's northern beaches, who is determined to do what is right, no matter what.**

So with a little over two years until the next election, the government is in great danger of losing the essential element that helped it into power in the first place: trust.

The question has become: can – or should – brand Baird be rehabilitated? The corporate world might offer some guidance.

A 2010 article in *The Economist* reasoned that the key to successful brand rehabilitation "lies in making a cool-headed assessment of how much the scandal damages your company".

"Does it involve life and limb, rather than less consequential matters? Has it spread beyond particular products or particular divisions to afflict the entire corporate brand?"

"If the answer to both questions is yes, then companies are well advised to go into collective overdrive; if it is no, then they can experiment with more nuanced responses, such as lopping off a tainted product or sacrificing a rogue division."

There's no traditional scandal here, but if it is swapped with unpopular decisions the same questions can be applied to the NSW government and its leadership.

The answer to whether the Baird government's unpopularity has metastasised or is it confined to its leadership is a difficult one, but key to its future.

Has Baird become so tainted by the unpopular decisions that have been made that no amount of rehabilitation can be effective while he is at the helm?

Or is it more a collective unpopularity that can only be reversed by a whole of government response?

Baird's approach appears to favour the latter, at least for now. Quizzed on the polls and his personal popularity plunge on Thursday, he responded defiantly.

All of the decisions taken "are setting this city, this state, up for the long-term future," he said.

"I think that's the job of government. To consider the evidence, the facts and make decisions not just for today, not just for today's headlines, but for the future. And I certainly think that's what we've done."

In other words, Baird believes the path to rehabilitation is sticking the course and bringing the electorate with him. No mea culpas, no backdowns. It's a high risk, crash through or crash approach.

It worked in an extraordinarily successful fashion for his contentious plan to take electricity privatisation to the 2015 election.

But that was at the height of his popularity as a new premier. The next two years will determine if it can work again in an altogether different set of circumstances.

Sean Nicholls is state political editor.

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