

Gladys Berejiklian could be the ultimate 'refresh' for Mike Baird's government

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The end of 2016 cannot come quickly enough for Mike Baird, the NSW Premier who has gone from hero to near-zero in only 12 months.

This time last year Baird was triumphantly announcing the \$10.3 billion privatisation of electricity firm Transgrid and detailing the infrastructure gifts with which he would shower the long suffering people of NSW.



Mike Baird: 'it's a terrible result'

The NSW Premier is shocked by the result of the Orange by-election with the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party likely to win the seat from the Nationals. Courtesy: ABC News 24.

On Wednesday, Baird was being accused of political bastardry and setting the cause of fighting corruption in NSW back years after the resignation of Independent Commission Against Corruption chief Megan Latham who was told she must to reapply for her job amid a controversial restructure.

As Baird has acknowledged, 2016 has been his annus horribilis. Apart from the bright moment of the \$16 billion part privatisation of electricity distributor Ausgrid in October there has been little else to celebrate.

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His flagship road and rail infrastructure projects – WestConnex, Sydney Metro and the light rail among them – are being met with a violent backlash from people whose lifestyles they are disrupting.

The government's forced council amalgamations are being derailed by legal action, raising the prospect that elections may not be held until 2018 – uncomfortably close to the next state poll in March 2019.

The flogging handed to the Nationals at the November 12 Orange byelection was the culmination of a period which saw Baird sensationally back down on his push to shut down the greyhound racing industry – something he had consistently said was immovable on as it was "the right thing to do".

No wonder Baird is planning a cabinet reshuffle to "refresh" the government as it heads into the second half of its second term.



As Mike Baird has acknowledged, 2016 has been his annus horribilis.

Photo: Edwina Pickles

Despite a push from new Nationals leader John Barilaro to reshuffle before Christmas, Baird is determined to hold off until early next year.

It has caused many to ask why, given it will leave the cabinet in limbo until at least the end of January.



Baird has a ready-made successor in Treasurer Gladys Berejiklian.

Photo: Louise Kennerley

After that new ministers would have just weeks to get across their portfolios before Parliament returns in mid-February.

The government says it wants time to make a considered decision, which might well be true.

But it's not out of question to suggest it is also designed to give Baird time to assess his future and whether it's nearing time to step down and allow an orderly transition of power.

The proposition is not as ridiculous as it sounds. His popularity, once soaring, is on a downward trend with little sign of that changing. He has gone from being the cleanskin saviour of the NSW economy to the face of a government that the polls show is rapidly becoming on the nose with voters.

Baird has never aspired to be in politics for long – just long enough to achieve change in NSW, which is arguably what he has done.

The economy is booming, the budget is swollen with surpluses and things are being built with the money he has reaped from electricity privatisations. There is only one of those to go – Endeavour Energy – which presumably will be completed by the middle of next year.

Finally, Baird has a ready-made successor in Treasurer Gladys Berejiklian, who is largely unsullied by the turmoil he and the government have experienced this year.

Berejiklian survived the transport portfolio intact and as Treasurer has overseen massive surpluses and been a driving force behind the government's power privatisations.

She has a great story to tell as the publicly educated daughter of working-class Armenian migrants.

Handing the baton to Berejiklian would nullify one of Labor's expected attacks in the 2019 campaign – that Baird will quit Parliament as soon as the election is won and return to the private sector.

It would also wrong foot an ascendant Luke Foley whose entire focus has been on damaging Baird's cleanskin brand. Berejiklian has barely appeared on the radar.

On the downside, Baird quitting politics would mean a byelection in Manly, where there is a strong history of independents defeating Liberals.

Many still believe Baird is the government's best chance to lead them to re-election in 2019.

But if he decides he has had enough and the government is looking for a genuine "refresh" that really gets voters' attention, an orderly change of leadership could well be the answer.

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