

It's high time to ban council capers

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Premier Mike Baird / Picture: Sam Ruttyn

COUNCIL amalgamation is the sleeper issue for the Baird government. It promises political pain, albeit mostly in safe Coalition seats, and while I support the plan to reduce the state's 152 councils to 112, the government's argument it is being done for some sort of meaningful financial benefit reeks of BS.

Sure you will save a bit from having a few less council general managers around the place but there is not much of a suggestion of other savings.

The state government has claimed it will save "up to" \$2 billion a year, which is only a few dollars per ratepayer.

The mergers would be better justified if they occurred as a part of a package of widespread local government reform.

Labor leader Luke Foley has a point when he asks why the government is announcing council reform and not do more to fix council improprieties and corruption.

Mike Baird should ban developers from serving on councils, just as they are banned from giving donations to candidates for state parliament.

Likewise, he should tighten rules around political donations to local councillors.

We have seen enough from ICAC in recent months to know that much more needs to be done in this area, not to mention the allegations swirling around Auburn council, which it seems were not addressed for a substantial period of time.

The Office of Local Government should be beefed up — with a proper investigations unit — and perhaps moved from its headquarters in Nowra.

In Victoria Jeff Kennett cut the number of councils from 210 to 78 soon after being elected and also demanded rate revenue and expenditures be cut.



Former Victoria premier Jeff Kennett.

Baird is actually offering councils taxpayer money to accept mergers.

Like he followed Kennett in leasing half the electricity networks (Kennett actually sold 100 per cent), Baird is following the Kennett legacy on this one.

His decision has a fair bit to do with legacy too — to be the Premier who finally merged councils after so many others had put it in the too-hard basket.

Talk is that after the Boundaries Commission has finalised its reports the government will next month announce which mergers are going ahead. Local government elections would then be held as normal in September, except for those councils affected, who would have elections in March.

It is my understanding that some councils have come back with alternative proposals, and they will be examined.

It is the well-heeled older communities who are causing the most noise.

Liberals in North Sydney were amazed the issue played a large role for voters in the recent federal by-election.

Perhaps, for this reason, Malcolm Turnbull might be happier if the issue was put to one side for a couple of months — even though his deputy Barnaby Joyce is publicly opposing a merger in his own seat of New England.

Another delay is a string of court challenges — from Woollahra, Hunters Hill, Ku-ring-gai and Botany Bay — with Woollahra seen as the test case.

Perhaps not surprisingly a recent Galaxy poll shows the merger proposals have only lukewarm support community-wide. Internal government polling on the issue finds similarly, I hear, with its Reachtel result finding 45 per cent support fewer councils, 33 per cent opposed and 21 per cent neutral.

There are also accusations of some political gerrymandering going on with the proposed new boundaries.

The poll results are better, it has to be said, than those on the sale of poles and wires before last year's election.

The great hope from those in government is that people will forget this issue ever existed in 18 months' time — apart from being another reform peg for Mike Baird to hang his hat on.

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/its-high-time-to-ban-council-capers/news-story/aed1384958039fd4caf60e3de04b3600#load-story-comments>