

Council merger fallout widens for Baird and Turnbull as administrators questioned

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COUNCIL MERGERS ANNOUNCED

The Baird government has created 19 new councils across Sydney and NSW.

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The Baird government's council amalgamation agenda threatens to disrupt Malcolm Turnbull's re-election campaign in key marginal seats in NSW as more councils face the axe in the next seven weeks and as federal politicians distance themselves from the scheme.

The mass sacking of councils also posed a public relations threat to the Baird government's development plans in Sydney, many of which were predicated on the involvement of councils that would now be without elected officials for the next 15 months.

As councillors in 42 councils across Sydney and NSW grappled with the realisation on Friday that they no longer held offices, the political and policy fall-out of the sackings remained uncertain.

Mr Baird and Local Government Minister Paul Toole have argued amalgamations were needed to make councils more efficient, save ratepayers money and to allow councils to better deliver major projects.

One government source said resistance to council mergers was not registering as an issue in state-wide polling. But conservative MPs in marginal electorates continued to speak up about it.



Minister for Local Government Paul Toole, Premier Mike Baird and Deputy Premier Troy Grant announce the amalgamations on Thursday. Photo: Janie Barrett

Nickolas Varvaris, whose electorate of Barton falls into the newly formed Georges River Council, Canterbury-Bankstown Council and Inner West Councils, said the mergers would provide "nothing but personal political benefit to a small cabal".

"The contempt that Mike Baird, Paul Toole and the NSW government have shown towards the electorate is nothing short of breathtaking and displays how out of touch they collectively are," Mr Varvaris said.

Andrew Gee, the Nationals candidate for the federal seat of Calare and the state member for Orange, said councils had been "thrown under the bus".

"I do not believe that there was appropriate consultation with individual MPs prior to this announcement being made, and I made this known to the Premier before walking out of the meeting," Mr Gee said.

The Baird government on Thursday created 19 new councils, to be run by administrators until local government elections are held in September 2017.

And if litigation that has prevented the creation of another nine new councils across the state was resolved in the government's favour, further tension could emerge in the weeks leading up to the July 2 poll.

A judgment in Woollahra Council's challenge to its amalgamation was expected within weeks. If Woollahra was unsuccessful, the path would be clear for an eastern suburbs mega-council.

Challenges by Sydney councils Mosman, Hunters Hill, North Sydney, Strathfield, Ku-ring-gai and Botany Bay, and regional councils Cabonne, Oberon, Gundagai could also be resolved by July 2.

The Hunters Hill and Strathfield challenges could affect the tightly-held seats of Bennelong and Reid.

Surveyed by Fairfax Media this week, most federal coalition candidates in NSW whose electorates were affected were keen to distance themselves from Baird's reform.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whose inner-Sydney electorate is home to Woollahra Council, declined to comment.

Other senior Liberals, including Treasurer Scott Morrison, Major Projects Minister Paul Fletcher, Health Minister Sussan Ley and Assistant Cities Minister Angus Taylor also either refused to comment or express an opinion on the proposed mergers.

The member for Bennelong, John Alexander, said he did not think a proposed merger of Hunters Hill, Lane Cove and Ryde would be a factor at the federal poll.

"Everyone will be happy here as long as their favourite member gets re-elected," Mr Alexander said.

Former prime minister and member for Warringah Tony Abbott said he could "see the arguments both ways" and, when pushed, said he would probably prefer a single Northern Beaches Council.

Ousted councillors in areas to be affected by major infrastructure projects, such as The Bays Precinct, WestConnex and the North Parramatta redevelopment scheme, also questioned whether community views would be adequately represented.

"Quite frankly, there will be nobody there to promote the concerns of residents," outgoing Parramatta lord mayor Paul Garrard said.

The administrators will have all the powers of the former council, which means they will be able to decide which projects proceed and how funds are spent on upgrades up until the next council elections in September 2017.

New councils will also have an implementation council of about six, probably made up of the mayors and deputy mayors.

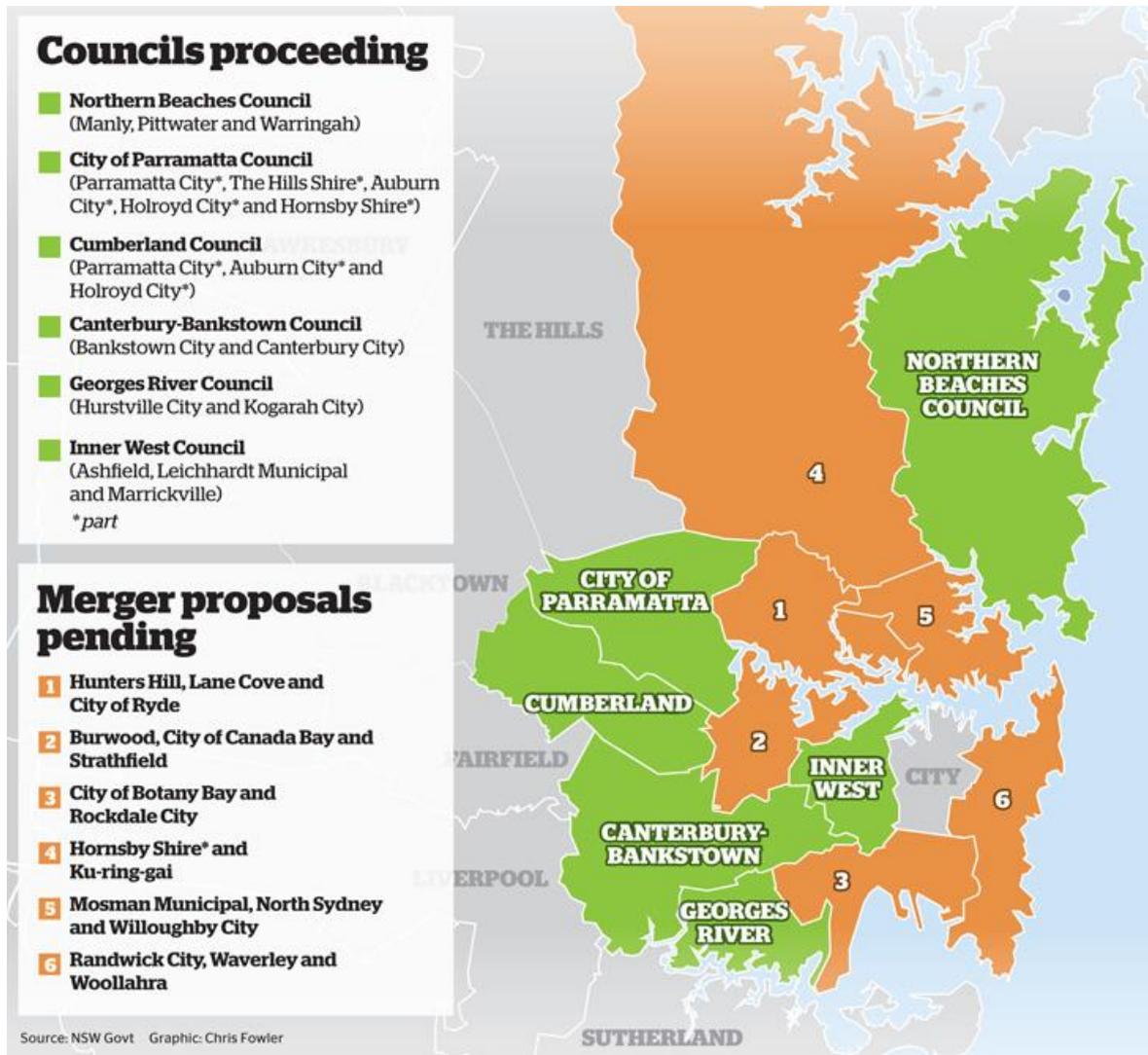
And there will be local representative committees, which are expected to be drawn from those councillors who have indicated they are willing to serve.

Greens MP David Shoebridge criticised the appointment of a former planning official as administrator of a new Inner West council, where the WestConnex motorway is controversial.

There is likely to be controversy over John Turner, a former Nationals MP, being appointed administrator for the merger of Gloucester, Great Lakes and Taree councils.

Gloucester Council had opposed the development of coal seam gas in the region.

A spokesman for UrbanGrowth NSW said the organisation had been and would continue to collaborate with councils and the community on its projects.



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