

# Gladys doubles down on city council mergers, talks up action on school overcrowding

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Billy Cantwell



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IN her maiden speech to Parliament on May 6, 2003, the newly elected Liberal MLA for Willoughby said: “I wish to pledge to all my constituents that for as long as I have the honour and privilege to represent them in this place, I will always put my local community first.”

Almost exactly 14 years on, Gladys Berejiklian, 46, is the 45th Premier of New South Wales having previously served as an effective Transport Minister and an efficient Treasurer.

Her public profile has soared. Just over 100 days into her premiership, she has clearly embraced the responsibility of running Australia's most populous and dynamic state.

Such is her enhanced recognisability that both the electorate and the media now need only use her first name. Brand Gladys, it seems, has found a market.



*Premier of NSW Gladys Berejiklian at her Northbridge home. Picture: John Feder*

But the former banker, who now calls Northbridge home, is facing a plethora of challenges, not least in her own area. Her government's determination to push through unpopular council mergers has infuriated ratepayers in Ku-ring-gai, Lane Cove, North Sydney and Mosman; historical underinvestment in school infrastructure has led to chronic overcrowding particularly in public primary schools, and jaded commuters remain apoplectic about Sydney's relentless gridlock.

Looking ahead, she will also have to steer the ship through the troubled waters of imminent population growth with the harbour city slated to accept two million more people by 2036.

"We are growing," she told the North Shore Times.

"Clearly my goal is, no matter where you live in Greater Sydney – whether it's my community or another – you should still feel a sense that your community is not changing too much, that the local character is protected."

The Greater Sydney Commission wants the north shore to increase its population by 18 per cent while other areas face targets as high as 36 per cent. Some, including the Australian Institute of Architects, believe the north shore – with its well-established public transport infrastructure – should take a larger share of the increase. But the Premier disagrees, pointing to Chatswood as an example of how the area had already embraced increased density and population growth.



*Gladys Berejiklian, with her family at Maggio Cafe in Cammeray. Picture: Justin Lloyd.*

“If you look at what Chatswood looked like 15 years ago to what it does now, you wouldn’t recognise it. I feel we’ve done our bit and obviously will continue to do our bit but I also feel it’s very important in well-established areas to protect the amenity. Our area is older and it’s been built up over many decades. Other areas are what we call ‘greenfields’ and haven’t had that built-up nature, so I’m very pleased with the (north shore population) targets. I think they’re reasonable.”

Ms Berejiklian has already survived an early test of her popularity in the community with last month’s North Shore by-election, won narrowly by Liberal candidate Felicity Wilson.

In September, ratepayers are scheduled to go to the polls for local government elections. Given that her government remains determined to push through council mergers, does she concede that the elections may be seen as meaningless?

“I completely accept that I would prefer that things were more certain,” she conceded. “We’ve dealt with the vast majority of council mergers and we’re down to the last five.”



*NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian with her family after her swearing-in ceremony at Government House in January. Pic: AAP Image/David Moir*

The government recently missed a deadline to appeal against Ku-ring-gai Council’s successful court bid to block the merger with Hornsby. Ms Berejiklian said the government was considering legal options but she remained committed to amalgamations.

“I would like to see it through and I know that some community members have a different view. I believe in the reform. I think it’s important for the future of our community.”

She played down the brand loyalty to existing individual councils, declaring herself a resident of the “lower north shore”.

“I don’t really feel a community of interest with the council. I feel I have a community of interest with the lower north shore. I think most people feel like that and just want to see their councils run efficiently.”

She insisted protection of amenity in local communities would be easier under merged councils.



*Gladys Berejiklian, like Hillary Clinton, is now known by just her first name.*

“(People) should not be concerned about what amalgamations are going to do to our community. In fact what amalgamations do is to allow us to concentrate development in parts of our community where it’s acceptable and to protect our suburbs.

“So I say to people we have a greater chance of protecting our local community, of ensuring we keep what is sacred to us by supporting the amalgamations in my view.”

Overcrowding in north shore schools is another bugbear for many parents but the Premier said she believed that her government had confronted the issue.

“When we came to government, for 16 years our community had been completely ignored and I’ve now ensured that every school in our community has received an upgrade or else has been allocated money for one.”

Chatswood Public, she said, would be next.

“The Education Minister and myself are looking at (Chatswood Public) closely and I appreciate the site challenges. It’s essentially an inner-city school. There is huge demand. It’s an outstanding school.”

Housing affordability is another key priority. Allowing homeowners to painlessly downsize is something the Premier sees as a concern for older residents.



*Gladys Berejiklian's outlines agenda in first news conference as NSW Premier*

“Their main concern is ‘I’ve lived in this suburb for 30 or 40 years, raised my children ... will I find something in my local community?’ That’s where the challenge comes: do you provide extra housing and how does that affect the character of the area? But also how do you support people who want to make that move.”

## Comments

### Dennis

It's a shame that Premier Berejiklian refuses to honour her commitment to listen to the people and put her 'local community first', both for the residents of councils being forcibly merged and for the Liberal Party itself.

There is no evidence to support her contention that 'most people don't have a feeling of community of interest with their council'. It's unfortunate she feels disconnected that way but the overwhelming feedback from communities across NSW that are upset with forced council mergers is quite the opposite. This is just polispeak and wishful thinking.

The Premier also provides no rationale for saying that 'protection of amenity in local communities would be easier under merged councils'. How could this possibly be so? As with the entire process, a convincing case for forced mergers simply hasn't been made, either by the former Premier or the current one.

Sadly, the Premier also refuses to acknowledge examples of failed forced mergers the world over that rates tend to rise not drop and that services tend towards the lowest common denominator. We've seen no evidence at all that the Government has special resources or capability to accomplish what others in the past have not. The idea of 'bigger is better' is old, retrogressive thinking. There is no

advantage in creating 'lumbering elephants' of massive bureaucracies that can't react to local needs.

The new thinking being espoused globally, in Britain and America for instance, is for smaller councils working together with shared services, a sensible alternative that has been proposed to the Premier but that she refuses to discuss.

By doubling down on city council mergers Premier Berejiklian will accomplish two things for certain: a renewed resolve of residents to fight the mergers until they are rescinded and the loss of her job when the Liberal Party is voted out of power in the 2019 general election.

## **Maria**

Keep the pr coming - Gladys and her govt need all the help they can get.

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/north-shore/gladys-doubles-down-on-city-council-mergers-talks-up-action-on-school-overcrowding/news-story/88be89ced544a78b278e3f981fcc4229>