

WestConnex, lockout laws, greyhounds: has NSW Premier Mike Baird's bubble burst?

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There could hardly be a more perfect metaphor for NSW Premier Mike Baird's woes than the incident at his Manly home last weekend.



Mike Baird's bubble bursts, poll reveals

After almost six years, the gloss has started to come off Baird's Coalition government.

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Creeping through the dark in search of a glass of water, Baird slipped in his socks and [fractured the L4 vertebrae in his lower back](#).

Taking to Facebook, he posted an X-ray of the shattered bone with the chirpy observation that the punch lines "pretty much write themselves".

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Facebook has become a favourite Baird platform, a place he can use his dad-next-door personality to speak directly to the people of NSW, often with great success.

The post elicited some sympathy, a bit gentle ribbing but also a whole lot of bile.

Paramedics pointed out the NSW government had slashed their level of death and disability cover and lamented they might have been called to assist.

A professional DJ who said the NSW lockout laws had forced him interstate hoped "your fall hurt you as much as your policies hurt me".



Protest against the city's lockout laws in September. Photo: Michele Mossop

More than one challenged him to ban socks, staircases and water in an echo of the charge Baird is running a "nanny state" following the ban on greyhound racing and drinking in the city after 3am.

It was what arguably any prominent Australian politician should expect.

But this is a man recently hailed as one of Australia's most popular politicians, even feted in 2014 as a potential replacement prime minister for his unpopular mate Tony Abbott.

It's the same "Magic Mike" whose cleanskin image helped save the NSW Liberal party from electoral oblivion after the spectacular downfall of Barry O'Farrell and the shame of an inquiry by the corruption watchdog into party fundraising.

"I can't pretend to anyone that it's been easy. It's not." - NSW Premier Mike Baird.

It reflects a tough year for the Premier and his government.

The laws were introduced by O'Farrell, but their impact over two years on business and Sydney's cultural life has been placed squarely at Baird's feet.



Health Minister Jillian Skinner. The previously calm health portfolio has been hit with a series of scandals. Photo: Janie Barrett

The push forward on council amalgamations and revelations about the harsh treatment of home owners having their properties compulsorily acquired for projects like the WestConnex motorway have prompted questions about his government's commitment to fairness.

The previously calm health portfolio has been hit with a series of scandals.

Baird's part privatisation of electricity company Ausgrid was temporarily derailed by the federal government on national interest grounds relating to Chinese bidders.

The extended brawl over the decision to end greyhound racing in NSW has not only put offside an entire industry but also key former supporters of the government in the media who now brand him a "dictator".

Even his strong Christian faith is coming under attack as some accuse him of wowseryism in their search for a motive.

Two years into his tenure even some of Baird's most ardent supporters are beginning to ask: has his bubble finally burst?

If so, what does that mean for the Coalition government's chances of claiming a third term in 2019 – something until recently almost universally taken for granted?

In a candid admission, Baird tells Fairfax Media: "All of us feel the impact of the past few months. I can't pretend to anyone that it's been easy. It's not."

But he insists there is "something quite energising about focusing on why we're in politics, as local members in government and what we can do with that opportunity".

"I think all of us want to be in a position that when we come to the end of the race we hand across the baton and [the state]'s in much better shape in the short, medium and long term than what we inherited."

Upon coming to the Premier's office Baird almost immediately distinguished himself from his predecessor's more cautious approach by pressing ahead on the long-term lease of state-owned electricity poles and wires businesses.

Against significant odds, Baird took an issue that had become toxic in NSW politics to the 2015 election and won.

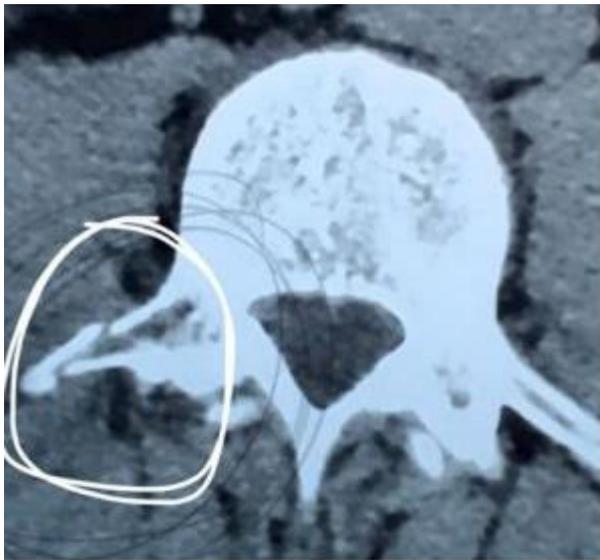
The experience emboldened him and cemented his belief that if you clearly explain your reasons to the electorate, voters will reward you with support.

But with these latest decisions the formula has not held.

Whether this is simply the inevitable result of being in government for nearly six years and eventually needing to make unpopular decisions or a more fundamental shift is a question now occupying the minds of government MPs.

Baird won last year's election but the swing against the government put Labor within reach come 2019.

Labor has been left with 34 seats in a 93-seat Legislative Assembly and needs to gain 13 seats for majority government in 2019 – a uniform swing of 8.2 per cent.



Exclusive Reachtel polling commissioned by Fairfax Media has Labor and the Coalition locked at 50-50 on a two-party preferred basis – a strong turnaround from the 54-45 per cent March 2015 result.

The government also faces three byelections in Wollongong, Orange and Canterbury in November – sure to serve as another measure of its popularity.

Peter Chen, a lecturer in politics at the University of Sydney, says Baird needn't be overly worried.

Mike Baird posted this X-ray on social media after fracturing his vertebrae.

Photo: Facebook: Mike Baird

"Baird might be annoying people but he's not annoying people enough that he's going to lose government," he says. "Because the state of NSW needs a viable opposition to say, 'Well if we throw this guy out we're comfortable with [the alternative].'"

Chen contrasts Baird's situation with that of former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett when he was defeated by Labor's Steve Bracks in 1999.



NSW Premier Mike Baird is suffering a voter backlash. Photo: Janie Barrett

"[Luke] Foley is an interesting character, he's a bit underrated," Chen concedes. "But it's not like you can say he has this great new team of people who are like the 'new Labor' in the way that Bracks was. He had his own agenda. He wasn't just waiting to take over government again."

Liberal MLC Peter Phelps, at times a harsh internal critic of the government, believes voters will focus on the economy at the ballot box.

Phelps railed against the government's decision to ban the greyhound industry and quit as whip over its moves to force more petrol stations to sell ethanol. Yet he believes the NSW government's positive economic story will prevail in 2019.

NSW has the lowest unemployment rate of all states – 5.2 per cent – and routinely tops Commsec's "State of the States" list which measures economic growth, construction activity and retail spending.

"While there might be a bit of white noise on a range of issues, come 2019 people are going to be asking themselves what they ask at every election. That is, am I happy and better off than I was before?" he says.

"Is Baird burning a bit of capital on these issues? Of course. But it's not in my view going to have a material effect on the vote barring an economic downturn in this state. And I don't see how that could happen short of a national economic meltdown."

However political strategist Bruce Hawker, who was chief of staff to former NSW Labor premier Bob Carr, says there are warning signs for Baird.

"You can see a significant cooling in the public enthusiasm for him; that's a very dangerous development for him," Hawker says. "Because one thing I know from personal experience

having been Bob Carr's chief of staff throughout our time in opposition is that once governments lose their lustre, particularly at a state level, find it very difficult to retrieve it."

Hawker believes there are strong parallels between Baird and former NSW Liberal premier Nick Greiner, who "came into office promising great reforms and a new broom but in a very short time was looking quite the reverse".

Part of Greiner's problem, Hawker says, was that "he was seen to be doing things in a high-handed and non-consultative way, particularly around issues around the sale of historic buildings which he planned, the closure of schools and cuts to health services".

Hawker also disputes the view Foley is not an effective alternative premier.

"Luke Foley is firing on all pistons," he says. "As a result of that we will see the same thing that we saw with Carr: his public recognition will rise. People will see him as an alternative premier, somebody who has an alternative vision for the state who is fighting for what he believes in."

He says Foley "is doing what you have to do as an opposition leader. You have to get onto the front foot and be heard in the electorate. People can then start to form a view about you as an alternative."

Less than three years from the March 2019 election, there is no doubt Baird is feeling the weight of office.

"It's tough and I'm not going to pretend otherwise," he says. "I never envisaged being in this role. I went into it with no illusions. It's as tough if not tougher than I expected."

He says the expectation is 2016 will be "obviously the toughest year in government. But you can't guarantee that because there are challenges that come along."

Baird acknowledges "there's no doubt that polls may well have tightened, so [Labor] might view that as a success."

But he accuses Labor of being "soulless" in its pursuit of power, as evidenced by its "opportunistic" decision to oppose the ban on greyhound racing.

"It's actually not about gaining power," he says. "It's about what you can do if you get there."

Having embarked upon or ticked off many of his major reforms, Baird says it is time develop a fresh agenda to take to 2019 arguing for a third term.

"Talking to politicians post their time in politics there is a consensus view among them in their honest moments that they have regrets that they didn't do more and they didn't take more risks," he says.

"I don't want to get there."

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/westconnex-lockout-laws-greyhounds-has-nsw-premier-mike-bairds-bubble-burst-20160825-gr1mrt.html>