

Andrew Clennell: Inherited councils debacle hurts Gladys Berejiklian

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EXCLUSIVE Andrew Clennell



Council mergers have proven very unpopular with many residents across the city.

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GLADYS Berejiklian may not have performed her last backflip, as I understand it, with serious talk in cabinet in recent weeks around some sort of windback on local council amalgamations.

Two ministers, Planning Minister Anthony Roberts and Better Regulation Minister Matt Kean, recently argued strongly in cabinet that the council amalgamations stood to hurt the government very badly in September local government elections.

Roberts actually argued for areas that have already amalgamated to be allowed to hold plebiscites to see if people still agreed with those amalgamations, according to my sources.

Front of mind for Roberts, the member for Lane Cove, is controversy around the proposed amalgamation of Hunters Hill Council with Lane Cove Council, which is still before the courts.

Apparently Gladys Berejiklian shut down the discussion, which took place in the “political discussion” part of cabinet.

But the council rumour mill also holds suggestions the government is preparing for the eventuality of plebiscites in some areas.

One of the reasons the issue is back on the agenda is the fact that Woollahra Council has won special leave to appeal in the High Court against its amalgamation with Randwick and Waverley councils.

Should Woollahra ultimately triumph in the High Court, the government would be under great pressure to reverse all city council mergers still before the courts.



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Then there is concern — as several councils continue their appeals against the government's wish to merge them — that there is the spectre of councils just mounting more and more challenges in the courts.

For example, Hunters Hill Council could no sooner lose its court battle than it would lodge another appeal on different grounds. And so it would go on and on, with all of us paying for it.

Kean and Roberts both raised concerns, I am told, in the cabinet meeting about a fortnight ago that Liberal council candidates are set to “get smashed” in the September local government elections by voters unhappy with their merger deals, with Hornsby having ceded some of its area to Parramatta council, for example.

Some ministers are saying this is another “mess that Mike Baird gifted Gladys” on top of continuing fallout over the failed greyhound racing ban and on top of the proposed introduction of the Emergency Services Levy, which Ms Berejiklian “deferred” (read: dumped) last week.

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Now, as premier, Berejiklian has been forced to dump it and embarrass herself.

And, again, there is a similar feeling around mergers.

But while ever the premier defends the decisions Mike Baird took, saying she was in cabinet at the time and supported them, the more she suffers for them.

I've always been a supporter of there being fewer councils in Sydney. But Baird really needed to go to the Upper House to pass the legislation to make it so, not just push it through the Boundaries Commission. Thanks to this, he created a process which has allowed the court challenges to occur.

But Fred Nile opposing the amalgamations ruined the original plan.

Baird appeared in a hurry to get the mergers through, come hell or high water, when he could have negotiated further with the Upper House.

Now we know why he was in such a rush. He wanted to get all his reforms done and get the hell out of there, to the job at the bank.



There has been serious talk in cabinet in recent weeks around some sort of windback on local council amalgamations.

In February, shortly after becoming premier, Berejiklian announced that she would walk away from country council mergers currently before the courts but continue with city mergers still in limbo and have the government fight for them to continue in the courts.

Those mergers still in limbo include Strathfield, Burwood and Canada Bay councils; Hornsby and Ku-ring-gai; Hunters Hill, Lane Cove and Ryde; Mosman, North Sydney and Willoughby, and Randwick, Waverley and Woollahra.

Botany Bay and Rockdale councils decided to merge after losing in the Court of Appeal.

The problem with just turning around and dumping those city mergers before the courts — apart from it being another backflip — is that it would lead to protests from those councils which did the right thing and merged, such as the Northern Beaches Council.

But at some point, the Premier has to make the decision as to whether she wants the council amalgamation issue carrying on into the second half of next year, with a state

election by then just around the corner, as councils continue to fight in the courts against it.

A decision in favour of Woollahra could be a godsend in one respect — you dump all the mergers before the courts and stop upsetting some of those areas — but a curse in another respect, with already-merged council areas not happy.

“It’s a total f ... ing mess left to us by Mike Baird,” a senior government figure said yesterday.

One senior government source says: “My view is if Woollahra wins, we’ll follow suit in the city (and back down on mergers before the courts).”

But there would “definitely be no plebiscites”.

Whatever happens, the chances of Baird’s goal of turning 152 councils into 113 — already diminished by a backdown on some country councils — could be further diminished in the months ahead.

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