

Mike Baird's cool-dad persona loses its sheen when he treats the public like children

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Not long ago, Mike Baird was the country's most popular politician but last weekend, 5,000 people marched against his increasingly paternalistic policies



Mike Baird's carefully crafted cool-dad image was rigorously maintained by a crack social media unit Photograph: Jane Dempster/AAP

Alex McKinnon is Junkee's political editor, and acted as MC at the March Against Mike.

On Sunday, an estimated 5,000 people walked from Sydney Town Hall to NSW Parliament House as part of the catchily-named March Against Mike, a one-size-fits-all protest for anyone riled up at the government of [Mike Baird](#).

Sydney, as a rule, isn't known for the size or effectiveness of its protests – that's more of a Melbourne thing. And it isn't as though the endless and chronically boring federal election campaign has seen people's interest in politics spike. But the [March Against Mike](#) was different from the usual collection of scrappy diehards and socialist splinter groups who congregate at Town Hall to air their grievances.

There aren't many ways to get the DJs and club owners railing against the lockout laws working alongside the suburban ratepayers angry over forced council amalgamations, but NSW premier, Mike Baird, and his government have awakened a potent and very [Sydney](#) brand of anger.

It's easy to forget how politically untouchable Baird used to be; as recently as January this year, Newspoll rated Baird [the most popular politician in Australia](#). His carefully crafted cool-dad image was rigorously maintained by a crack social media unit, his principled stance on issues like refugees endeared him to progressives who might be otherwise turned off by his religious conservatism, and he had a cleanskin appeal after the Grange-fuelled downfall of Barry O'Farrell and the ongoing trainwreck of NSW Labor.

Which makes the speed and ferocity with which Baird has fallen from grace all the more deserving of a closer look. For younger voters, the sheen started to come off Baird's brand in February when he posted a patronising and factually murky defence of the lockout laws on Facebook. In isolation, that can't account for Baird's decline – the lockouts are still supported by a [solid majority of voters](#), after all. But a similarly large protest organised by anti-lockouts group Keep Sydney Open earlier this year was one of the first expressions of an emerging collective sentiment that, far from being the friendly surfer polmie he sells himself as, Baird is just a smiling face slapped over the chronic governance and corruption problems that have dogged NSW for years.

The effect of that realisation has been profound. As the government has imposed a moralistic, serially invasive agenda that treats the public more as wayward children to be disciplined than citizens to be engaged, people have responded by whisking away the semi-obscurity and lack of scrutiny the state government usually operates under. The government's intrusion into every facet of Sydneysiders' lives – our commutes to work, our neighbourhoods and local councils, our nights out – have forced a large and increasingly broad cross-

section of people to actually pay attention to state politics and the mundane but pervasive ways in which it shapes our lives.

The dull knottiness of opaque planning processes and the hyper-local conflicts that pad out local newspapers have taken on a new significance, stitching themselves into a larger and very grim picture of where Sydney is and where it's going.

Barangaroo and the government's defence of coal-seam gas drilling have become emblems of the hold corporate donors wield over lawmakers and the relentless develop-at-all-costs mindset that has turned parts of Sydney into concrete graveyards. The lockouts, crackdowns on pill testing and punitive restrictions on cyclists have exemplified the heavy-handed paternalism of authorities eager to hand out criminal convictions for laughably minor offences. WestConnex and the Tibby Cotter Bridge have become the latest ruinously expensive white elephants approved more for the benefit of their financial backers than for the public.

Presiding over all of this, branded by his devastating new moniker #CasinoMike, is the premier. Baird has become synonymous with a feeling that's been percolating among Sydneysiders for a very long time – that we don't own the city we live in.

That singular idea, manifesting and unfolding in myriad different ways across the city and state, came together at the March Against Mike on Sunday. Disparate strands of dissatisfaction that would otherwise battle alone in obscurity came together and found that, all across Sydney and beyond, people are fighting the same fight.

Whether this actually spells political downfall for Baird remains to be seen. He still holds a commanding lead over the Labor opposition in opinion polling, and there's nearly three years until he has to face voters again. But the moment when a mood is captured and expressed by many voices learning to speak as one is a powerful thing. Baird and his government underestimate it at their peril.

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