

Council amalgamations: Nationals and federal Liberals united on opposition to council amalgamations

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FORCED COUNCIL AMALGAMATIONS ANNOUNCED

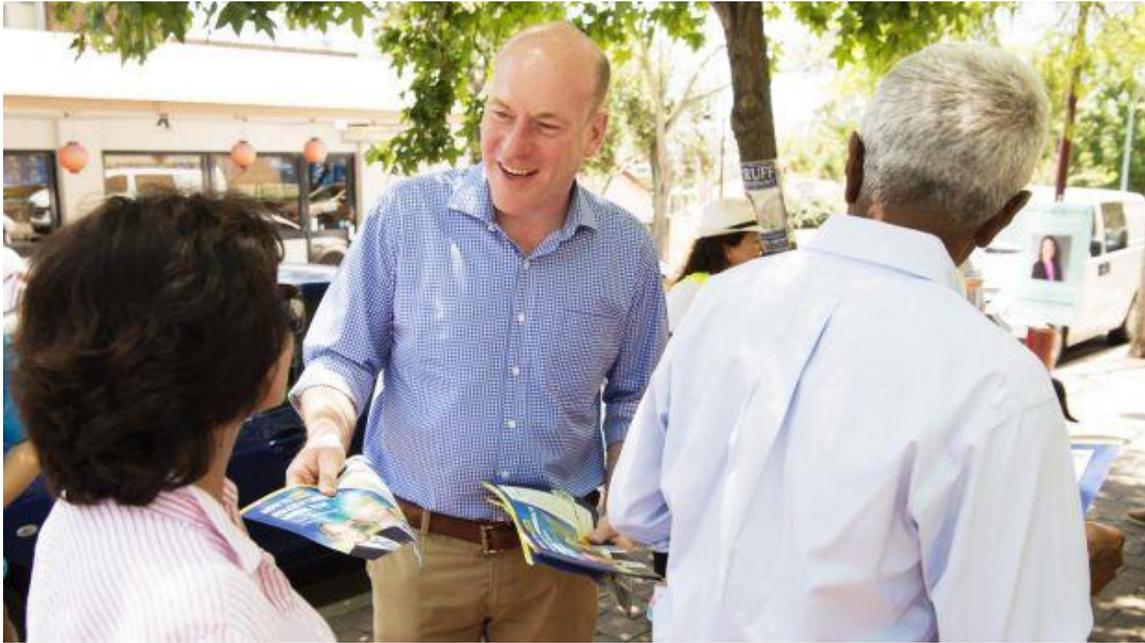
NSW Premier Mike Baird announces details surrounding the state's local government amalgamations.

- More councils join legal battle with state government over mergers
- Council amalgamations fuelling Liberal backlash in North Sydney byelection
- Mike Baird sets out the path to fewer councils

They might represent polar opposites inside the Coalition but the Nationals' Barnaby Joyce and the newly elected Liberal member for North Sydney, Trent Zimmerman, are united on one issue: they want the Baird government to back off on forced amalgamations of councils.

While local government issues rarely impinge on federal politics, the issue of forced amalgamations is threatening to break through during the looming federal campaign, particularly in the bush.

The issue is particularly toxic in regional areas slated for amalgamation because of fears about the impact on community resources and jobs.



Trent Zimmerman blamed the amalgamations agenda for the swing against the Liberals in December. Photo: James Brickwood

On Tuesday, Mr Zimmerman, the new federal MP for North Sydney fronted a crowd of about 100 residents at Lane Cove Country Club, as part of his meet-and-greet program.

He faced several questions on the state government's plan to amalgamate Hunters Hill, Ryde and Lane Cove councils. When Mr Zimmerman called for a show of hands on the issue, all but two indicated they opposed council amalgamations.

Mr Zimmerman blamed the Baird government's amalgamations agenda in part for the 13.4 per cent swing against the Liberals in December. He's less sure it will be an issue at a general election, but with three out of four council areas that comprise his seat campaigning against amalgamation, it's a potential vote changer.

Luckily for the city based Liberals, the most vociferous opponents of council amalgamations are in safe Liberal federal seats.

But outside the cities it's a different matter.

Barnaby Joyce, the deputy prime minister, is facing a real challenge from independent Tony Windsor, who is running again after losing to Joyce in the last election. Walcha council, in the seat of New England is vehemently opposed to the Baird government's plan to amalgamate it with Tamworth Regional council.

"I fully support the strong community calls for the proposed amalgamation of Walcha Council with Tamworth Regional Council to be withdrawn," Mr Joyce said in a recent press release.

But Mr Windsor, who also opposes the forced council amalgamations, said Mr Joyce's words ring hollow.



Tony Windsor says Barnaby Joyce's stated opposition to council amalgamation rings hollow. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

"It's tokenistic for Joyce to say he opposes the merger when he's a senior player in the party that is forcing it," he said.

Mr Windsor if it is a close race the issue of council amalgamations might make the difference.



Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce during a 'politics in the pub' event at the Royal Hotel in Merriwa. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

The issue is also causing angst on the South Coast where the Liberals' Ann Sudmalis holds the seat of Gilmore by 3.8 per cent. Kiama Council is vehemently opposed to a merger with larger Shoalhaven which is seen as more pro-development.

"This is an area of high unemployment. If we lose a whole stack of positions – professional jobs – and we will over time, that will be a disaster for the community," she said.

In one of the Liberal party's most marginal seats, Eden Monaro, held by just 2.9 per cent, the issue of council mergers has been resolved after Palerang Council agreed to merge with Queanbeyan rather than be torn apart.

Other areas where forced amalgamations are causing white hot anger are Oberon, which is in the seat of Calare, held by the Nationals with a 15 per cent margin.

There is also strong resistance to the Baird government's merger plans in Harden and Cootamundra which had proposed to merge, but instead have been directed to merge with other neighbouring councils.

Both councils are in the seat of Riverina which the Nationals hold by 19 per cent.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/fed-liberals-nationals-feel-the-heat-from-council-amalgamations-20160427-gog1w3>