

# Council mergers: Bill Shorten pledges to block Mike Baird's 'insult to democracy' with \$20m plebiscite

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*Leader of the Opposition Bill Shorten on the campaign trail in Gladstone today.  
Picture: AAP*

**LABOR leader Bill Shorten has promised to kill off Mike Baird's controversial council mergers plan if he is elected Prime Minister.**

The Opposition Leader will promise \$20 million in funding to the Australian Electoral Commission to hold plebiscites in all 152 NSW local government areas.

In a major blow to the NSW Premier's plan, Mr Shorten said the money would give communities the opportunity to vote to keep their original council if they wanted.

It comes after Mr Baird announced his government would slash the number of councils from 152 to 115. In Sydney, councils will be slashed from 43 to 25.



*NSW Premier Mike Baird with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen*

Mr Shorten will use a precedent set by Liberal prime minister John Howard in 2007, when he promised to fund the Australian Electoral Commission to torpedo Queensland premier Peter Beattie's plan to cut councils from 156 to 72.

Mr Shorten criticised Mr Baird's council amalgamations as an "insult to democracy".

"The Liberals' plan to sack directly elected representatives and force councils to amalgamate is an insult to democracy and the people of NSW," Mr Shorten told The Daily Telegraph.

The plebiscites will be run at the request of councils.

And even councils that have not been amalgamated will be able to request a plebiscite so they can use it to affirm community support to continue as a stand-alone entity.

"This move will give the people of NSW the power to stand up to the Baird Liberal government, and their plan to unilaterally dispense with democracy and force councils to merge, and to sack elected councillors," Mr Shorten said last night.

When Mr Baird, with Local Government Minister Paul O'Toole, announced the move this year, he described it as "the most comprehensive local government reform in more than 100 years".

Nineteen councils were immediately sacked in May and replaced with administrators and interim general managers.



*A vocal crowd gathers outside Malcolm Turnbull's electorate office to protest against council mergers.*

In one of the biggest changes, an Inner West Council was created by joining together the Ashfield, Leichhardt Municipal and Marrickville councils.

A Cumberland Council was created by the merger of Parramatta City, Auburn City and Holroyd City councils.

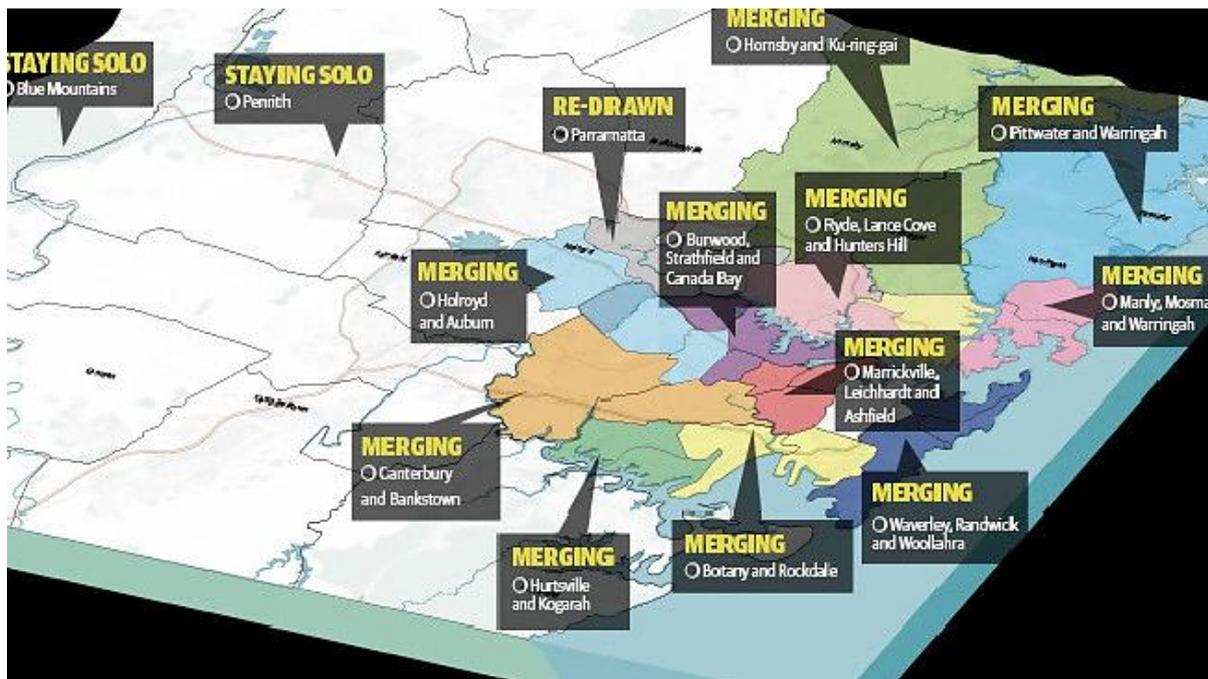
Another 12 merger proposals were considered to be “pending”.

This includes the contentious merger of Randwick City, Waverley and Woollahra Municipal councils.

Another 14 previously proposed council mergers are no longer proceeding for various reasons.

Mr Baird said the council elections for each of the new councils would not be held until next September.

This caused a community backlash which involved powerful talkback host Alan Jones likening the Premier to Russia’s President Vladimir Putin.



*The changing council landscape in Sydney.*

Last week the NSW Opposition Leader Luke Foley held a summit of about 20 sacked mayors. He compared Mr Baird’s process to a “coup”.

The plan has also come up against legal challenges with affected councils taking the government to court to halt the mergers.

The proposed merger of Strathfield, Burwood and Canada Bay councils has been taken to the Land and Environment Court.

It is yet to be formally overturned, but the court recently found there were legal errors in the report looking into the merger.

Mr Toole said the government-appointed delegate in charge of the Boundaries Commission report, which formed the basis of the proposed set of mergers, will have to reissue the report.

Mosman, Hunters Hill, Ku-ring-gai, Oberon and Walcha councils are also appealing forced mergers.

Mr Baird said he was not prepared to move on the amalgamations.

He said he would do whatever it takes to make sure the mergers go ahead.

“We will take whatever action is required,” the Premier vowed. “If we’re required to amend reports or redo sections or whatever is required, we will do that.”

Mr Baird has previously said his changes come with a hefty price tag of \$500 million, but that the expenditure was well worth it.

“Reducing waste and red tape through local government mergers could free up close to \$2 billion over the next 20 years.

“This would allow councils to fund better services and new infrastructure for communities or to lower rates,” Mr Baird said.

“We want the community to have confidence in councils again. Unfortunately this confidence has been shaken by councillors who have put self-interest ahead of community interest.”

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/national/federal-election/council-mergers-bill-shorten-pledges-to-block-mike-bairds-insult-to-democracy-with-20m-plebiscite/news-story/1c25c2bd972796f095b0d8f83c47eb8e>