

# Tumbarumba amalgamation protests intensify

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They're mad as hell down Tumbarumba way. The Snowy Mountains town best known for John O'Brien's wonderful poem 'Up at Tumba-bloody-rumba shootin' kanga-bloody-roos' has become the touchstone for renewed opposition to the NSW Government's disastrous forced council amalgamation strategy.



*We're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore*

In May 2016 the local council was merged with neighbouring Tumut Shire to form Snowy Valleys Council. Since then many local residents have been campaigning to reverse the merger.

The issue is not going away. If anything, the voices for a demerger are getting stronger. Those advocating for the restitution of Tumbarumba Shire have joined the Save Our Councils Coalition, a group representing councils that have – successfully and unsuccessfully – resisted mergers in NSW.

Its vociferous campaigning ensures that council mergers and demergers will remain a significant issue at the next NSW state election, due in a little over a year on 23 March 2019.

Last week Tumbarumba came to town. It was Valentine's Day, but there was little love for the NSW Government. A vocal band of Tumbarumba residents, dressed in orange, held a noisy protest outside State Parliament.

They were addressed by representatives of all political parties represented in the NSW State Parliament except the governing Liberal-National Coalition.

Dr Neil Hamilton from the Save Tumbarumba Shire group said: "We are here today to initiate an inquiry into the merger process that will hopefully get our council back. This forced merger is bitterly opposed by the community. It is also strongly opposed by Save Our Councils Coalition and many communities across NSW."

The delegation left with the NSW Minister for Local Government a petition signed by 700 residents – more than a quarter of the adult population – to re-instate Tumbarumba Shire on its old boundaries, bordered by the Murray River to the west and the Snowy Mountains to the east.

Since the forced merger the Tumbarumba community has held many protests, including a candlelight march, and conducted an optional citizen plebiscite asking residents whether they wanted to reverse the merger, which returned a 93 percent 'yes' vote.

The opponents of the merger point out that Tumbarumba Council, despite its small size (just 3,500 residents), was the second best 'fit for the future' council in NSW and was not recommended for a merger in an inquiry held after the Government's initial proposal.

"The Baird/Berejiklian Government simply went ahead and merged Tumbarumba anyway," said Dr Hamilton. "The merger was a disgraceful and unforgiveable act."

Addressing the protest, NSW Greens' David Shoebridge said: "We are here today in solidarity with the people of Tumbarumba and from shires and councils around the state who are demanding they get their councils back."

"If Gladys Berejiklian thinks that the issues of forced council mergers are going away, she is going to have a hell of a fright in 12 months' time when she is told she will be out of office if she hasn't given them their councils back."

Tumbarumba is in the state electorate of Albury, nominally a safe Liberal Party seat. But the Coalition vote in the last two NSW election has been at historic highs since the scandal-ridden Labor Government was defeated in 2011, and the Government is no certainty to be returned in the March 2019 poll.

"What happens in local communities should be a decision for local people. Labor's policy is that if communities choose to demerge, that is a decision for them and they should be allowed to demerge," said Labor's Peter Primrose, addressing the protest.

“Gladys Berejiklian has not yet fixed the problem of forced amalgamations,” said Robert Brown from the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party. “There has to be an opportunity for communities to decide if they wish to demerge. We will continue to fight. We will support legislation for a plebiscite to enable you to have your say.”

His party scored a surprise win over the incumbent National Party in the 2016 Orange by-election dominated by dissatisfaction with Government policies. It saw one of the largest swings against a government in Australian political history.

Fred Nile from the Christian Democrats said that his party had always been against forced council amalgamations. “We call upon Gladys Berejiklian today to agree to de-amalgamate Tumbarumba and also Guyra.” (Guyra was forcibly amalgamated into the new Armidale Regional Council at the same time as the Tumbarumba-Tumut merger).

“Every political party except the Liberal and National Parties are strongly against forced council mergers, and is strongly for giving communities whose councils were forcibly merged a plebiscite to allow them to de-merge,” said Dr Hamilton.

“Unless the Government allows communities who have lost their council this opportunity to demerge, it is highly likely that the Liberal-National Party will be thrown out at the next state election.”

*‘But as for me, I’m here to say the interesting piece of news  
Was up at Tumba-bloody-rumba, shootin’ kanga-bloody-roos’.*

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