

Turnbull's mate Bruce McWilliam joins NSW council merger revolt

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Bruce McWilliam at his home in Sydney's exclusive Point Piper with his dog Georgina. 'All you will get is these huge, self-serving bureaucracies'. Picture: Renee Nowytarger

Residents in some of Australia's richest postcodes are preparing to fight forced council amalgamation plans in a battle Coalition MPs fear will spill over to the federal election.

In Sydney's Point Piper, where median house prices topped \$15 million last year, Seven Network commercial director Bruce McWilliam is concerned that a forced merger of councils by the NSW government will cause rates to spiral and services to decline, as well as threaten his area's leafy character and sense of community. The plan was a "socialist nightmare", he said.

The backlash across the state over the Baird government's amalgamations plan could cost Mr McWilliam's close friend and neighbour, Malcolm Turnbull, who lives 100m down the street.

"All you will get is these huge, self-serving bureaucracies," Mr McWilliam said. "They will get bigger and bigger teams and have prescriptive policies on everything and they will try to get involved in wider social issues."

Mr McWilliam said his council, Woollahra, was responsive to what residents wanted, but that if it was subsumed into a “(Sydney Lord Mayor) Clover Moore-type mega council” the authority would likely “become a law unto itself and suck the former municipality dry”.

Under the Baird government’s plans, the number of Sydney councils would be slashed from 43 to 25 and regional councils cut from 109 to 87, to save up to \$2 billion over 20 years.

Across the glittering harbour on Sydney’s north shore, residents of Hunters Hill are equally fired up, fearing their area’s rich heritage is under threat.

Hunters Hill Mayor Richard Quinn said he believed the timing would be critical for the federal election, especially if it was a double-dissolution poll on July 2, because there was a possibility the new interim councils would commence the day before.

“That would be right at the critical point of this whole process where people are really fired up,” Mr Quinn said.

“How are they going to have their say in this? The only opportunity is the federal election.”

Anger over the plan is not confined to well-heeled suburbs. The fury has ricocheted across NSW, with voters from suburban and regional council areas also prepared to protest against the Coalition at the ballot box.

The shake-up of NSW councils is the most dramatic upheaval of local government for 20 years, when Victorian premier Jeff Kennett sacked elected councillors in his state, replaced them with handpicked commissioners and crunched 210 municipalities into 78 in 1994. Woollahra Municipal Council yesterday became the third NSW council to launch legal action against the amalgamation plans, in an effort to halt its planned forced merger with Waverley Council, which takes in Bondi Beach and Randwick City Council, further south. The Prime Minister’s electorate of Wentworth largely covers the council areas of Woollahra and Waverley. Mr Turnbull holds the seat with a margin of about 19 per cent after a recent redistribution.

In a bid to insulate itself from the changes, Hunters Hill has proposed merging its back office and services with those of Ryde and Lane Cove, while retaining three separate councils to preserve local decision-making. Mr Quinn said this would deliver cost savings while retaining the benefits of local representation.

Racing NSW chief executive Peter V’landys, one of the area’s more prominent residents, believes the Baird government should be willing to consider the proposal. “If there’s a better way of doing it I think the government has got to be a little bit more flexible and keep each council’s identity present,” he said.

Mr V'landys said combining Hunters Hill with the far higher-density areas of Ryde and Lane Cove would be like "a forced marriage between three different religions". "I think the government has really underestimated the anger out there in the community," he said.

Hunters Hill residents could expect at best to get only one voice on a larger, merged council, which in years to come could alter the area's strict planning controls, he said. "People purchased in Hunters Hill because it is very much a conservation area," Mr V'landys said. "If they go and change that, the premium we've paid just goes out the window."

While the forced mergers are a state issue, Hunters Hill residents made clear their displeasure at the plans at the ballot box in December — taking out their anger on federal Liberal candidate Trent Zimmerman in the North Sydney by-election.

Mr Zimmerman won the blue-ribbon Liberal seat in the December by-election, which was previously held by former treasurer Joe Hockey, but suffered about a 12 per cent swing on the primary vote. The biggest swings, up to almost 16 per cent on first preferences, were sustained at the Hunters Hill polling booth.

Mr Zimmerman attributes at least part of that swing to a protest vote against the amalgamations process. "It is relevant that the biggest swing in the by-election occurred in Hunters Hill, where I think feeling is strongest," he said. Mr Zimmerman, a former North Sydney councillor, has made it clear he is opposed to the policy.

"The reason for that is multifaceted but, importantly, councils are the closest level of government to the community," he said.

"It's important they represent a community and have the support of their residents and I'm not convinced that bigger is necessarily better in maintaining that grassroots connection."

Passions against the proposed council mergers are running high in other areas of Sydney, and across the state. In the bellwether federal seat of Eden-Monaro, the residents of Tumbarumba, on the southwestern slopes of the Snowy Mountains, are gearing up for a public relations offensive against the amalgamations.

The council has been told it must merge with Tumut Shire, an hour's drive from Tumbarumba over mountain ranges that can be inaccessible in winter. Tumbarumba Shire Council Mayor Ian Chaffey said the mergers made no sense. "They (residents) have put - together an action committee and warned: 'We will fight this to the death'."

Liberal MP Peter Hendy won Eden-Monaro in 2013 with a wafer-thin margin of 1085 votes (although he now holds it with an estimated margin of 2.9 per cent following a redistribution) — and he has taken up the Tumbarumba residents' concerns.

Dr Hendy, who is Assistant Cabinet Secretary, wrote to NSW Premier Mike Baird last month urging him “in the strongest possible terms to reconsider and abandon the NSW government’s proposal for this merger”.

At the opposite end of the state, in the federal electorate of New England, Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce faces a battle to hold his seat against independent Tony Windsor. Mr Joyce has written to NSW Local Government Minister and Nationals MP Paul Toole, telling him the forced merger of Walcha Council, in his electorate, with the Tamworth Regional Council is a mistake.

Walcha resident George Spring said he could not think of another issue that had ignited so much passion. “I feel like I’ve woken up in Eastern Europe,” he said. “It’s diabolical how they’re handling it and there’s huge anger in the bush. I’m worried there will be a backlash against the Nationals at the federal level because that will be the first chance they get.”

COMMENTS

Luke

Fight for retaining your council, do everything you can. I have been part of such a fight. I live in Noosa Queensland. A labor state government took our council from us. We fought and fought and got it back. It took some years of planning and much hard work however we have just had our second council election since regaining our Noosa council. We got it back because the Newman Government could see it had been taken unfairly from us and promised if they got into power they would allow us to have a plebiscite to see if the residents wanted their own council back again. This saw a resounding 97% of the voting population vote for the return of it. During the few years we were amalgamated with a much bigger council our rates went up, there was no interest shown by the larger council in our area which is an internationally recognised UNESCO Biosphere Reserve one of only 14 in Australia. Because of the neglect of the area by the bigger council this international listing became vulnerable. This amalgamation which was forced upon us by a Labor State Government who took no notice of the wants of the residents. Democracy was nowhere to be seen. It will be a long time before Labor State Governments have any chance of getting a vote in Noosa again.

As was said at the time of the London uprising people with the amalgamation of local councils into larger councils had lost their sense of community. There is a lesson to be learnt here without community an area has no soul.

Come to Noosa we will tell you how we won, and show you an area which is now loved again and respected by the residents. It looks fantastic, people are happy again and we have had our best tourism results for a long time.

NEVER GIVE UP.

Peter

The Coalition went to the 2011 election with the banner policy of No Forced Amalgamations, in 2015 election they ran dead on it, they would not discuss it, said it was a non issue. Months after the election they declared they had a mandate for it and started putting in place a process which would bypass parliament, and the electorate, the process is a concocted boundary commission of professional public servants paid to declare the fraudulent government process as legitimate.

Justin

I'm a Liberal party member and I run my own business.
I understand the policy.
And I hate the policy.
Wake up Mike Baird.

Hastings Bob

@paul Yep, that's pretty much what happened in Victoria all those years back. Some councils may have not been viable and amalgamation was a benefit but many amalgamations were not useful at all. The main thing that happened was to create and entrench an overpaid bureaucracy. Rates went up. Basic services declined and became more expensive but the councils decided to branch out into social engineering. There was at least one de-amalgamation (Benalla & Mansfield) after the amalgamations because it was recognised as stuff up. There may have been others but it was a long time back and I don't recall. The dust has settled now but at the time I thought it was just another nail in Jeff Kennett's future "coffin".

Linda

@Hastings Bob @paul Same thing happened in QLD: as rate payers, we were forced to pay for amalgamation in 2008 under the ALP, then de-amalgamation under the LNP but without divisional representation. Unfortunately councils now use rates to fund NGOs to be re-elected, as opposed to providing cost effective services of roads and waste management: ratepayers see increasing levy's on their rates, including one to pay for recycling.

Lorraine

Fight it. Bigger is not better. Forced amalgamation here in Qld has been a disaster for us ratepayers. Rates almost tripled, inefficiency and wastage from an out of touch megalithic bureaucracy and a Lord Mayor with a decided whiff about him. Used to have a great local councillor whom we saw all the time and felt confident that he cared and had his finger on our areas business and social pulse. Feel hugely disempowered now, but that is what amalgamation is all about. Concentration of power into a few bullies' hands.

Duncan

"Rates almost tripled ". . .what a crock of it!!

Cliff

@Duncan Banana shire central QLD land valuation dropped by approximately 2/3 from 98000 to 35000 rating amount tripled to slightly increase rate payment from previous 6 months. So yes effectively rates tripled. The advice coming from most of us dumb qlders is don't do it. The smaller more efficient councils (running at no or next to no loss) will be swallowed by larger councils and their assets stripped. Number of councillors halved pay doubled so no nett benefit for rate payer.

Roger

Having been through forced council amalgamations in Queensland, I can assure ratepayers that the fears expressed in this article are real and will be felt by all. We have seen rates increase with no productivity gains from synergies. Council employee numbers have grown to the extent that, in our case, the Regional Council now employs more people than the three councils it replaced. So much for efficiency.
My advice is to fight it all the way.

Robert

Bye Bye Barnaby.