

Will Barilaro merge his and voters' minds?

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It is no secret that a key component in the voter devastation of the Nationals in the Orange byelection was the issue of forced council mergers.

That and the on-off greyhound racing ban saw the Nationals heavily punished in what was an ironclad safe seat.

In quick time, new Nationals leader and Deputy Premier John Barilaro was asked what he thought about amalgamations. He replied he would form his own opinion about the merits of mergers.

Residents in Orange, Blayney and Cabonne have strongly opposed the proposed merger of their local government areas (LGAs). They have vowed not to back down.

The Cabonne anti-merger lobby group promised only a reversal of the proposal will go some way to restoring faith in the Nationals.

The group has reminded the state's political leaders a leadership change will not dissipate the anger and mistrust felt towards the Nationals. It wrote to Mr Barilaro to implore him to see things from their perspective and meet with them when he travels to the region.

Mr Barilaro did not rule out scrapping mergers. However, Nationals colleague and Local Government Minister Paul Toole said mergers would go ahead. That is the position of Premier Mike Baird.

So, will Mr Barilaro and his party acknowledge voter anger – and potential risks to future electoral support – and turn against mergers? That would seem unlikely and could cause ructions in government.

But, if Orange, and other, voters have long memories, not doing anything could cost the Nationals in future elections.

If the Nationals were to abandon support for the Orange merger, what happens to all the other LGAs where residents and councils are still fighting mergers?

Do Orange LGAs get a bye? Do other “rebel” areas? What about some metropolitan councils where Liberal Party members oppose amalgamation?

Many areas already merged like Dubbo and Wellington might argue they have a strong case for a de-merger - with the inherent “Orange” threat.

The government, particularly the Nationals, would have been better off listening to constituents in the first place or putting mergers to a community vote.

Much of NSW will be watching to see if Mr Barilaro will listen to voters and whether he can merge his mind with theirs.

<http://www.dailyliberal.com.au/story/4306087/will-barilaro-merge-his-and-voters-minds/>