

NSW Liberal Government in total disarray over forced amalgamations

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By Phil Jenkyn

Premier Mike Baird and Minister Paul Toole's handling of the local government reform agenda has been abysmal. Many within the Coalition are embarrassed and deeply concerned at the Government's attack on local communities and their local councils.

Both Baird and Toole addressed this year's Local Government conference on 12 and 13 October 2015 at Rosehill Gardens in Sydney.

The content and delivery of the Premier's speech has been heavily criticised. He was heckled and jeered by delegates, and on entering and leaving the conference. Many of those present do not support forced amalgamations of councils.

"Change has to happen" Mr Baird said. "You are on the cusp of history ... some here may no longer be in local government beyond the next election."

No credible evidence has been provided by the Government to support its drive to amalgamate councils and its mantra that 'bigger is better'. The evidence in fact is to the contrary.

"Mike Baird has now wasted \$1 million on TV ads trying to con the public that his forced amalgamation plan will leave local people better off," Save Our Councils Coalition (SOCC) spokeswoman Nella Gaughan said.

"We know that the only group to benefit from huge mega councils will be developers who have quite openly called for a reduction in the numbers of councils."

[ABC News](#), [ABC TV](#), the [SMH](#) and the [Daily Telegraph](#) covered the Premier's speech on 12 October and made comment on the reaction to it.

Minister Toole told the conference on 13 October that he was disappointed only nine of the state's 152 councils had agreed to merge. "And by the way, I even had some people come up to me and said - minister, consider me, I'll be the administrator for this area," he exclaimed to guffaws and jeers.

The [Daily Telegraph](#) and the [SMH](#) covered the Minister's appearance and hostile reception.

What the Premier and the Minister told the conference, and have been telling communities and councils for some time, was that they were waiting for the Independent Pricing and



Residents outside conference Photo: Ross Schultz

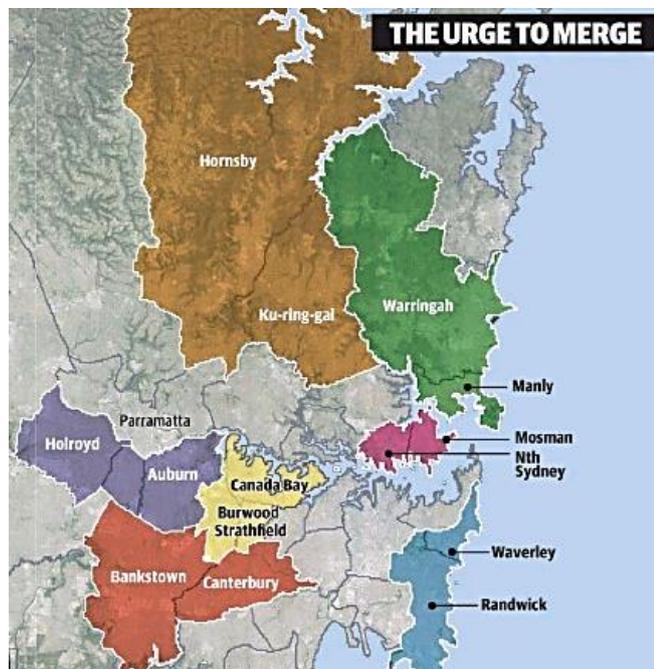
Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) report, to be received on Friday 16 October. That report would contain findings as to whether a Council was fit or unfit. The report would then be considered by Cabinet and decisions made as to council mergers.

However on Tuesday 13 October a leaked story appeared in the Government's favoured newspaper, the [Daily Telegraph](#) - PREMIER Mike Baird told his MPs yesterday that maps had already been drawn up for council amalgamations and the government needed to make "tough decisions", not be poll-driven, on the reform. This discussion with MPs had taken place at a Coalition Party room meeting on Monday 11 October before Parliament resumed on the Tuesday.

Communities around Sydney and across NSW were incredulous and outraged. How could this be if the report had not yet been released by IPART to the Government?

On Friday 16 October before IPART delivered its report the [Daily Telegraph](#) listed 15 Sydney Metropolitan Councils to be amalgamated into seven, with a map. The article states that Sydney's 41 councils are expected to be reduced to around 20 under Premier Mike Baird's local government overhaul.

Listed councils for merger are Auburn and Holroyd, Manly and Warringah, Hornsby and Ku-ring-gai, Canterbury and Bankstown, Mosman and North Sydney, Randwick and Waverley, and an inner-west super council made up of Canada Bay, Strathfield and Burwood.



The Telegraph states: 'An IPART report on mergers, which is being handed to the government today, finds more than half of NSW councils are financially unfit.'

What this reveals is that before the IPART report was received by the Government, the Daily Telegraph and the Government knew its contents, but no one else - no council and no community. The Government had already made up its mind.

[IPART](#) did in fact deliver its report to the Government on Friday 16 October. The Government went to ground pursued by the media. TV stations contacted Save Our Councils Coalition (SOCC), a coalition of community groups, councillors and residents across NSW fighting to keep councils local and prevent forced amalgamations. A media conference was held under the 'Tree of Knowledge' behind Parliament House at 1pm. Every TV station attended and ran the story that evening. Two of those stories are online.

[Ten Eyewitness News](#) Slashing councils in half - a proposal to radically redraw the suburban borders of Sydney was under new fire today with Premier Mike Baird in the spotlight.

[7 News](#) Plan to slash local councils - a residents' group is outraged by a plan to slash the number of councils in Sydney, claiming developers are the only ones set to benefit.

[ABC News](#) ran the story in its 7pm TV News and in an article online.

This is a serious breach of trust by the NSW Government. It shows a high level of arrogance, gross incompetence and a total lack of respect for local communities and their councils.

Communities and their elected councils are angry, very angry. The whole IPART process is in reality a sham.

[Councils](#) are calling for the IPART report to be released. [LGNSW](#) has slammed the Government's process as a "farce designed to justify longstanding plans to force council amalgamations."

The Liberal Government when elected in 2011 promised to communities that there would be no forced amalgamations, and that local communities and their councils would be listened to and respected. Basic Liberal Party philosophy one would have thought. Many are now very angry at the Government's attempt to destroy local democracy and its wanton breach of its promises to the community.



Hunters Hill residents and councillors standing on the steps of the Town Hall with a strong message. [The Weekly Times](#) on-the-spot PHOTO

The Hunters Hill's community is letting the Government know in no uncertain terms its position. The Ceremony of the '[Flying of the Colours](#)' on the steps of the Town Hall, and the ribbons on front gates shows this community's support for local democracy. The Ceremony has been captured on YouTube – see [VIDEO](#).