

FOKE Talk

Baird's Amalgamations Bite

"The toxic politics of forced council mergers appears to have cost Malcolm Turnbull at least three Coalition seats in NSW," writes Paul Cleary of the Australian.

On 12 May the NSW Government proclaimed 19 new council areas in NSW made up of merged councils. They also indicated 'in-principle support' for a further 12 council mergers, of which Ku-ring-gai and Hornsby is one.

Following years of public outcry against council mergers our high-handed Premier sacked all Councilors except for those currently in legal battles with the NSW Government. The impact of the unpopular merger plan can be seen in NSW's above-average swing of minus 4.9 per cent, compared with a national Coalition swing of minus 3.4 per cent.

Communities feel that Baird and Local Government Minister Paul Toole have nothing but contempt for local democracy.

The only targeted councils that were spared the amalgamation juggernaut were the ones where their Ministers spoke strongly against the idea. Most notably, Barnaby Joyce's electorate of New England.

Our own Minister, Mr Paul Fletcher, has been asked by his community to raise his voice against the merger proposalbut has done nothing!

Maybe Paul Fletcher has yet to notice that there was a **swing against him of 3.8% in Bradfield**, according to ABC News Election 2016 analysis, with a first preference of



only 61%. The other first preferences going to candidates who stood on a No Amalgamation platform! **Maybe it is about time our Liberal representatives started to listen to their community.**

Ku-ring-gai Council has commenced proceedings in the NSW Supreme Court over the state government's refusal to release the full KPMG report on council mergers.

As a result of this legal action, together with other Councils, aimed at securing access to the full and supposedly 'independent report', Barrister for Strathfield Council, Tim Robertson SC, told the court that new documents suggested a "lack of independence" on behalf of consultancy firm KPMG.

"Rather than being an independent advisor to government, KPMG was intimately involved ... in order to do the Government's bidding," he said.

A document authored by KPMG for

the Government, entitled Options Analysis – Local Government Reform, dated July 2015, suggests the firm was helping the Government build the case for council mergers.

It appears from a number of perspectives any semblance of independence was a farce from the very beginning of this merger process. As the financial benefits for the merger of Ku-ring-gai and Hornsby are non-existent in both the short or longer term this is nothing but a removal of local democracy!

The forced mergers, destructive changes to our Environment Laws, NSW Planning ramming through more and more items for fast-track approvals and the lack of true community consultation has led to an unprecedented number of rallies against the Baird Government.

Council mergers in Victoria and Queensland have been linked to the loss of state governments. NSW Liberals are well on their way to repeating this mistake unless they pay heed to the fundamental importance of local democracy in NSW!

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

This has been a tumultuous period for Council and the Ku-ring-gai community. We will not know for a couple of months whether Ku-ring-gai will remain a stand-alone council. The legal action challenging the Baird Government's boundary review process (forced amalgamation) has been deferred while the Judge is away.

With some of the secret Cabinet-in-Confidence papers released by the Court we have become more hopeful that Council will succeed in stopping the merger with Hornsby. From reports we are receiving from Save Our Councils Coalition, KPMG had more influence and involvement in the process than we were first led to believe.

We are pleased Mayor Szatow had the votes in Council to support the continuation of the legal action against the forced amalgamation imposed by the Baird Government, blocking a rescission motion posed by a number of Councillors. It is unfortunate these councillors continue to put their Liberal party interests ahead of the interests of the people they should be representing.

The Baird Government is continuing to push through many planning policy changes which aim to overrun any opposition. The pace of changes to planning & environmental legislation & policies over the past year has been extraordinary. The rollout of regional plans, urban renewal areas & priority precincts along with major projects continues at an ever increasing pace. This makes it

very difficult for communities to effectively respond, and critically, increases the risk of poor planning & governance outcomes. The pace of change is compromising effective community engagement and disturbingly, this appears to be its aim!

The Biodiversity reforms have recently hit a road block with the Farmers Association of NSW opposing the proposed changes. We have asked our state member Jonathan O'Dea MP to request the maps for Ku-ring-gai so we can assess what impact the reforms will have on Ku-ring-gai's special biodiversity.

We thank our members for attending our Annual General Meeting and the Public Forum "Fighting to Retain our Local Democracy". The theme of this year's Forum struck a real chord with people and the media, with so many communities affected across NSW.

Yours Sincerely,
Kathy Cowley

CONGRATULATIONS FOKE

FOKE was a 2016 finalist at the 22nd National Trust Heritage Awards for its 2015 Walks—the Annie Wyatt Walk, the Sheldon Forest Walk and the Turramurra Heritage Walk.



'Bioextinction Bill'

Pressure must continue on NSW Minister for the Environment, Mark Speakman to rescind the NSW Government's recent bills that are a backwards step for biodiversity conservation in NSW.

FOKE called on the Minister to withdraw its Draft *Biodiversity Conservation Bill 2016* and Draft *Local Land Services Amendment Bill 2016*.

FOKE considers the proposals to be a giant leap backwards in protecting biodiversity in NSW. Not only are they flawed, contradictory, poorly written but they significantly weaken the protections of biodiversity for NSW, including Ku-ring-gai.

The proposed bills will deregulate current environmental protections and allow for 'self regulation' as well as entrenching the fraudulent commodities system – known as 'biodiversity offsets' that sanction developers and big agribusinesses to destroy a habitat for a 'fee'.

FOKE supports the scientists in the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists and other peak environmental groups to redraft the legislation so that biodiversity protection improves in NSW and does not show the same environmental retrograde that has occurred in Queensland.

As of 28 June, the NSW Farmers group also declared their opposition to this deeply flawed Bill.

"Premier Baird's draft biodiversity law is now in tatters, with no support from the scientists, nor the conservationists and now not the Farmers", states Nature Conservation Council CEO Kate Smolski.

The NSW Government needs to seriously invest in restoring and protecting NSW's environment to halt escalating biodiversity extinction . . . not the opposite. **Please contact the Minister calling on him to stand up for Nature.**

Mayors Speak against Baird's Vandalism



Ku-ring-gai Mayor Cheryl Szatow's M a y o r a l S p e e c h to FOKE AGM 25 May 2016 (Abridged)

Whatever side of politics one is on, Ku-ring-gai and other targeted Councils share the common view that forced mergers are not only kicking councils to the kerb, but the people's democratic rights too.

Premier Baird, I wonder how the people of New South Wales will remember you? As the reforming politician you like to think of yourself as? Or as the political equivalent of a teenage vandal, destroying institutions and thumbing your nose at the communities of NSW as you do it?

To date, no-one in the Baird Government has properly defined who will benefit from forced council mergers. The one document that justifies the government's position that forced mergers are necessary remains shrouded from public view. The Baird Government appears desperate to keep this KPMG report out of the public's and the media's hands!

Over 80% of Ku-ring-gai residents have consistently said they do not want to be swallowed up in a mega council of 270,000 residents. Ku-ring-gai Council has consistently sought to stand alone, albeit participating in sharing services with other northern Sydney councils, and we have shown we are fit for the future.

Ku-ring-gai is a large, efficient Council which has developed significant projects with both State Government and the private sector and - try as I

might, I can see no benefit to our community in this merger. Not financially, not environmentally and certainly not in service delivery.

By any objective measure, Ku-ring-gai's finances are consistently strong and sustainable - and will continue to be so. Ten straight years of budget surpluses tells that story.

And what about rates: According to the NSW Government, the current rating structure in a merged council would not change for four years. But from Year 5, Ku-ring-gai ratepayers stand to pay up to 17 per cent more in rates and possibly even more.

Then there is the great unknown of remediating Hornsby Quarry with estimates ranging from \$50 to \$200 million. Based on these figures, every Ku-ring-gai ratepayer would be exposed to a minimum additional impost of \$600.

And what about the impact of the proposed merger on Ku-ring-gai's natural environment. Ku-ring-gai has been described as 'the green heart' of Sydney. Careful stewardship and long established planning policy continue to protect large tracts of bushland, national parks and the tree canopy that draws so many families to make their home here.

Ku-ring-gai Council is already at the forefront of preserving the natural environment for the benefit of greater Sydney, with sustainability programs aiming to reduce carbon emissions by 20% by 2020.

Since 2004 Ku-ring-gai has had almost 7000 new dwellings approved, mostly as medium density apartment buildings

FRIENDS OF KU-RING-GAI ENVIRONMENT INC.

Established 1994

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Janet Harwood

Denise Hendy

Kerrie Piper

Tanya Wood



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with an average height of five storeys. I can confidently say that we have honoured our duty to provide more housing and housing diversity.

At the same time, our Council spent over \$40 million buying nearly 20,000 square metres of land for new parks and public space. This is a very different approach compared with our proposed merger partner.

How can these two radically opposed planning philosophies be reconciled in a merged council? The truth is they can't!

Ku-ring-gai Council is a strong financial manager, has shared values with its community, is a leader in innovative ways of sharing services and facilities, and has nurtured an environment that our residents believe is worth preserving.

All this stands to be lost in a merged council. And once lost can never be recovered.

Lindfield Library Update

Lindfield Library Precinct Public Hearing

FOKE has been working to save the Lindfield Library Precinct from reclassification, rezoning and sale for high density unit development to the height of 7 storeys.

This site consists of the Lindfield Library, Seniors Centre, two tennis courts, 14 units for the aged and infirm, the old Baby Health Centre rooms, and currently the home to other community groups such as KYDS Youth Development Services.

This is one of the 24 public sites that Council is proposing to reclassify to sell in order to repay the now \$30 million debt from the purchase of 828 Pacific Highway Gordon for the relocation of Council staff.

The reclassification of the Lindfield Library site is premature as, though discussed, there are currently no approved plans or a Development application for a new library or alternate community rooms in Lindfield.

FOKE has collected thus far over 300 petition signatures which were presented to the Chair of the Public Hearing, held on 6 June 2016. FOKE presented at the Hearing, focusing on the need for a replacement Library and community facilities to be operational prior to any removal of the existing facilities.

FOKE and other presenters stressed the need to retain the Precinct for future public use due to the 25%-30% population increase currently forecast for Lindfield.

Despite the public concern at council's haste, the Chairman has recommended that the site be reclassified as 'operational land'.

However, he added the strong caveat that *"despite its reclassification, Council should retain ownership of the land and continue to operate the community facilities on it until suitable alternative facilities are available for use by the local community."*

It remains short-sighted in the extreme to move public land to operational land available for sale when there is already a lack of community and recreational facilities in the Lindfield area.

Service to the Environment Award to Janet Harwood



The Lions Club of Ku-ring-gai awarded Janet Harwood their 2016 Service to the Environment Award.

Janet Harwood joined the Friends of Ku-ring-gai Environment Committee 9 years ago and has been a champion for Ku-ring-gai's natural heritage ever since - particularly its magnificent and extremely rare remnant Blue Gum High Forest. She is on FOKE's Natural Environment Committee.

Janet is a powerful advocate for Ku-ring-gai's environment and fearless in her defence of Nature, challenging decision makers at all levels of government.

She has highlighted the failure of policy and decision makers to take into account the 'cumulative impacts' and the critical importance of the 'seed bank' stressing that Ku-ring-gai is one of the most 'environmentally sensitive areas' of Sydney that needs urgent protection.

We congratulate her on this achievement and continue to support her advocacy and determination.

BOOK TALK



JACK MUNDEY'S EVOLUTION

Meet the author of a biography on Jack Munday outlining his fervor in establishing Green Bans to preserve Sydney's heritage and natural environment.

Hear JAMES COLMAN'S talk about his book "THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT"

Tuesday 27th September 2016

Gordon Library, Meeting Room 1 at 6.30pm

Cost is \$5 to cover catering.

Bookings: <https://bookings.kmc.nsw.gov.au/coursesandevents>
Or call 9424 0120



Mayor Cheryl Sztatow talking at FOKE's *Biodiversity Matters. Ku-ring-gai Matters* Fundraising Luncheon for the Environmental Defenders Office (NSW) at Pecorino Café, Gordon in May 2016.