



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

**FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT**

**Notice of Motion**

9 March 2017

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**

**Ms SONIA HORNER ( Wallsend ) ( 12:42 ):** I move:

That this House:

(1)Notes that only five Hunter councils conducted elections on 10 September 2016.

(2)Notes that as a consequence there was uncertainty and inconvenience in the Hunter as residents were not sure if they would be fined for not voting, when in fact they did not need to vote.

(3)Calls on the Minister for Local Government to explain why there was such confusion with council voting across New South Wales.

Last September, some of my constituents went to the polls to elect their local representatives. The bulk living in the Wallsend electorate did not get a chance to have their say; however—thanks to the Baird and Berejiklian governments' mismanaged council amalgamation agenda—people did not know what they had to do. My office was inundated with calls from residents who were unsure where to vote, when to vote, or even if they had to vote at all. It was a symptom of the uncertainty Wallsend residents living in the Newcastle local government area have been forced to grapple with over the past two years.

Even as the new Premier hoses down talk about mergers in rural areas, the future of Newcastle City Council remains uncertain. Finally, the Premier declared that the marriage between Newcastle and Port Stephens was annulled, but that uncertainty caused much local anxiety—and the failed merger kept Newcastle City Council under a cloud, preventing council from getting on with work vital for the city. The local government reforms undertaken by the Baird Government were a slapdash, hurried affair from the very beginning. I have been told by council staff members and elected representatives involved that trying to meet the Fit for the Future criteria was a Sisyphean task. One said:

The goal posts kept shifting, the process was murky and we couldn't help feeling that the outcome would be decided on the whim of the Local Government Minister alone.

It was 20 October 2015 when it was reported that many Hunter Councils failed to meet the Minister's Fit for the Future criteria. In that opening salvo, Newcastle and Lake Macquarie were deemed unfit, while Port Stephens was found to meet the criteria. Eighteen months on, Lake Macquarie was found fit to stand alone and went on to hold its elections last September, returning a full-bodied and diverse council led by a popularly elected local mayor. The Minister for Local Government changed his mind on Port Stephens, once declared fit, and decided it was to be merged with Newcastle. It was estimated the merger could cost the ratepayers of the two councils between \$20 million and \$30 million—a drop in the pond compared with the \$590 million already spent by the Baird Government on amalgamations statewide. That is now wasted money. From the beginning, the concept was a dud. A young constituent who grew up in Port Stephens said the idea of the merger of the two councils was ridiculous. He said:

Port Stephens and Newcastle are very different places, with different needs.

Indeed they are. He continued:

Port Stephens is a great deal more rural than Newcastle. If the new council was centred on Newcastle, residents in the more remote parts of Port Stephens would lose out.

I agree; they would. A local resident told me:

It feels like the western suburbs of Newcastle don't get enough attention from Council as it is. How is it going to be any better if Council has to cover an even bigger area?

Last November, it was reported that council elections in Newcastle could be pushed back as far as the 2020s. President of Local Government NSW, Keith Rhoades, was quoted saying:

They say the delay will 'reduce the potential for voter confusion and additional cost', but I wouldn't be worrying too much about voter confusion. As we've just seen in the Orange by-election, voters are anything but confused about this Government and council amalgamations.

Is it not odd that the Government is now worried about voter confusion into the future when they were not very concerned in the past? Indeed, the Minister seems to be very confused. One of the biggest problems is the confusion of the Baird and Berejiklian governments about the whole nature of mergers, non-mergers and where we are headed. There is a great deal of uncertainty in the Newcastle council area and among my residents. Now that the Premier has hit the reverse button, it is time for full accounting.

This farce cannot go on any longer. It has gone on far too long. When will the new Premier and the Minister for Local Government explain to my constituents why this expensive, ill-considered and ultimately pointless policy was allowed to drag on for so long? We await the answer.

**Ms SONIA HORNERY ( Wallsend ) ( 13:13 ):** In reply: I thank those members representing the electorates of Terrigal, The Entrance, Oatley, Wyong and Camden for their contributions to debate on this important motion. I thank the member for Terrigal for his complimentary remarks but he did not mention that the Government took four years to decide whether or not to amalgamate councils. How did the Government get it so wrong? The member for Terrigal did not refer to the community concern about council amalgamations, which is why I moved this motion today. The member for Terrigal spoke about democracy but that was not evident in these council amalgamations, which caused voters a great deal of confusion. I hope that the Government has learnt its lesson and there is no confusion in future.

The member for The Entrance referred also to democracy and about the 81 councils that conducted elections last year. The Government has not yet indicated which councils will conduct elections this year, which is confusing for the community. I thank the member for Oatley for his reference to fax machines and for explaining how the Labor Party got it right. However, I disagree with

the member for Oatley. This Government did not get it right when it amalgamated councils; it got it wrong. This Government failed. The member for Wyong, who spoke eloquently in debate, referred to the cost of the advertising campaign. The Government could have put those funds to better use. He said that in 2016 half a million voters failed to vote—something that this Government should take into account.

Voters are still confused. The member for Wyong hit the nail on the head when he said that this Government failed our community. We must ensure that we have democratic council elections but that is not what occurred. Communities were not told whether councils would or would not be amalgamated; they did not know what was going on. I should have provided the member for Camden with a copy of my motion as he did not seem to know what it was about. He said that this Government consulted the community and that its dealings were open and transparent, but that is not what occurred I urge all members to support this important motion.