

Experts divided over Sydney council models

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning experts are divided over the NSW government's plans to reduce more than 40 metropolitan councils to just 25, saying there are significant concerns with the new boundaries.

The differences in populations, land area and service capability of Sydney's councils is the driving force behind the state government's controversial plans to reduce the numbers. But the poorer outer local government areas, have far higher populations and territory compared with more privileged smaller councils in Sydney's inner ring.

In 2011, 17 of Sydney's councils contained more than 100,000 people, the largest of them Blacktown, with a population of 312,000, while the smallest were Hunters Hill and Mosman, at 14,000 and 29,000 respectively.

The NSW Independent Local Government Review Panel reported in 2013 that while a substantial number of councils could continue more or less on their current path for several decades, very few were realising their full potential as partners in the sys-

tem of government. "There is a great deal of underachievement in local government and its resources and skills could be used to far greater effect to address the challenges facing NSW," the report said.

Key components of the NILGRP final report have been largely ignored, said panel chair Graham Sansom. "Most importantly, the government rejected our recommendations for an improved process and our options for much larger cities of Sydney and Parramatta that would facilitate the achievement of strategic planning and development objectives," he said.

The approach that NSW has now adopted bears some resemblance to the Kennett government's infamous reduction of Melbourne's councils in the 1990s. With the benefit of hindsight, few in Melbourne would want to see the clock turned back, and some would have amalgamated further.

The head of the Victorian premier's department, Elizabeth Proust, favoured a single council for the whole metropolitan area, similar to the Brisbane model.

"I suspect nobody now has the gumption to fake it to the next



Proust



Sansom

phase ... the single council option would not be attractive to the state government because it would create a competing power base, but consideration should be given to perhaps four or six mega city councils," she said.

Meanwhile, Professor Sansom said the best Sydney amalgamations include: "Hornsby/Ku-ring-gai (because Ku-ring-gai was seen as too small to stand alone and had similar socio-economic and functions as Hornsby); The Hills/Hawkesbury (which makes sense given the northwest growth sector); and the eastern suburbs, inner west and Ryde/Hunters Hill/Lane Cove groupings.

"The worst of the proposed amalgamations are splitting Warringah as opposed to a unified northern beaches council; Mosman-Manly (straddling Middle Harbour and dividing an obvious lower north shore grouping);

Botany-Rockdale (which splits Botany from links with the City of Sydney and divides the CBD-airport growth corridor, as well as splitting the closely interconnected St George sub-region; and Auburn-Holroyd (which cuts the Parramatta CBD from its immediate southern hinterland, and greatly reduces the potential for a Parramatta City with real strategic clout)."

Urban Taskforce chief executive Chris Johnson said the Parramatta amalgamations around Sydney's second CBD would reinforce its growing importance as a metropolitan centre.

"I am less positive about combining Rockdale and Botany Bay. While I understand they both front Botany Bay I see Rockdale as being less connected to the Sydney CBD in terms of jobs and higher density apartment housing. There are other connections for these two councils that make more sense to me.

"The next step in governance must be to get regional and district planning offices established for the six districts in Sydney."

Rodney Jensen PhD is a Sydney-based consultant in urban design and planning.