

So much pain for no clear gain

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Inside State



The Barnett Government's local government reform plan is quite a mess, with no clear timeline for implementation, a raft of arbitrary processes applying to different councils and no clear idea of the potential costs and benefits of the course of action that is advocated.

It will create spot fires across the metropolitan area as the minority of motivated ratepayers make noise about the inequities of the Government's approach, it opens a rift with the Liberals' partner in Government, the Nationals, and might leave a first-term Government backbencher in political danger.

The implementation could remain a running sore right up to the next State election in 2017, and it may not result in the Government getting the number of councils down to where it wants it.

And it is far from certain that the mere act of reducing the number of councils will achieve the goals of reform — more efficient administration and less red tape that caters for a growing Perth — that the Premier says he is trying to pursue.

What we now know, after the long-awaited release of the Local Government Advisory Board's report yesterday, is that Perth's 30 councils will be subjected to four parallel processes now running to try to bring their number down to 16. The bush — where 110 the 140 councils are — is left untouched.

Process one: some councils will be amalgamated under the

provisions of the Local Government Act, meaning ratepayers will get to vote on the mergers under the Dadour provisions of the Act and scuttle them if they have the numbers.

Process two: some councils will be subjected to boundary adjustments under the Act, meaning ratepayers won't get a say even though the effect in most cases is the same as an amalgamation. Some councils will be "adjusted" out of existence.

Process three: for the cities of Perth and Vincent, special legislation will be drafted to bring them together, though work on that drafting has yet to begin, and Nationals leader Terry Redman yesterday indicated the party would not support forced amalgamations. (The Nationals can scuttle legislation if they vote against it in the Upper House).

Process four: the Government has announced an aspiration to merge the western suburbs councils of Mosman Park, Cottesloe, Peppermint Grove, Nedlands and Claremont into a new City of Riversea but gave no details about how this would happen, nor any timeline for its implementation.

Somehow, residents of Fremantle and East Fremantle or South Perth and Victoria Park will be allowed to vote on their council merger, whereas residents in Subiaco and

Cambridge, Canning and Gosnells, or Belmont and Kalamunda will not. In each case, the net effect is the same — two councils become one — but the process is entirely different.

Why? Local Government Minister Tony Simpson was utterly unable to explain that yesterday. He tried to pin it on the Local Government Advisory

Board, saying he was empowered only to accept or reject its recommendations.

The real reason appears to be base politics: the Government has given votes to the ratepayers it thinks will go for mergers, and has removed the option for ratepayers it thinks will not.

The decision to merge Vincent and Perth by legislation is a curious case. If it simply merged the councils, then Vincent's larger number of residents and ratepayers would swamp those of the City of Perth, meaning Perth would likely elect left-wing lord mayors forever more.

The Government said it had to resort to a new law because it was rejecting the LGAB's recommendation to leave University of WA and the QEII medical precinct in the western suburbs council, preferring to bring them into the capital city council. But there is more to it than that, and the clue is in Mr Barnett's references to "special" capital city legislation in Melbourne.

While Mr Simpson denied there would be any vote weighting of Vincent residents vs Perth residents, the City of Melbourne Act is clear in that it gives businesses that own or occupy rateable properties within the council's borders two votes in an election, rather than one vote given to individuals who are residents or ratepayers.

It's pretty clear that some sort of gerrymander is proposed — but that is not without complications because two-thirds of the first-term Liberal MLA for Perth Eleni Evangel's constituents live in Vincent and the left-leaning locals are already making noises about throwing her out if a gerrymander is introduced.

Meanwhile, the intransigent



western suburbs (with the exception of Subiaco, which will be “adjusted” out of existence, subsumed by Cambridge) are kicked down the road, a noisy problem to be dealt with at some future date.

It’s remarkable that five years after it began, the reform project has come to this — a point which Mr Simpson yesterday characterised as “half time” of the process. It’s difficult to believe a government could endure more pain for less outcome — and that ignores the deleterious effects for residents whose councillors and staff will continue to be distracted from their core business by the interminable process.

How did we get here? Because the Government was never prepared to back itself in and clearly articulate its principles and its plan to get there before the last State election.

Instead, in a failure of political courage, Mr Barnett allowed himself to be backed into a corner where he ruled out “forcing” amalgamations — and so everything has had to be reverse engineered from there.

It makes the Government look tricky as well as incompetent and it is difficult to believe it would have endured more pain if it had just said: “We are going to get rid of half of the Perth councils, here is the map, and here is the legislation to do it.”

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Battle: Premier Colin Barnett and Local Government Minister Tony Simpson

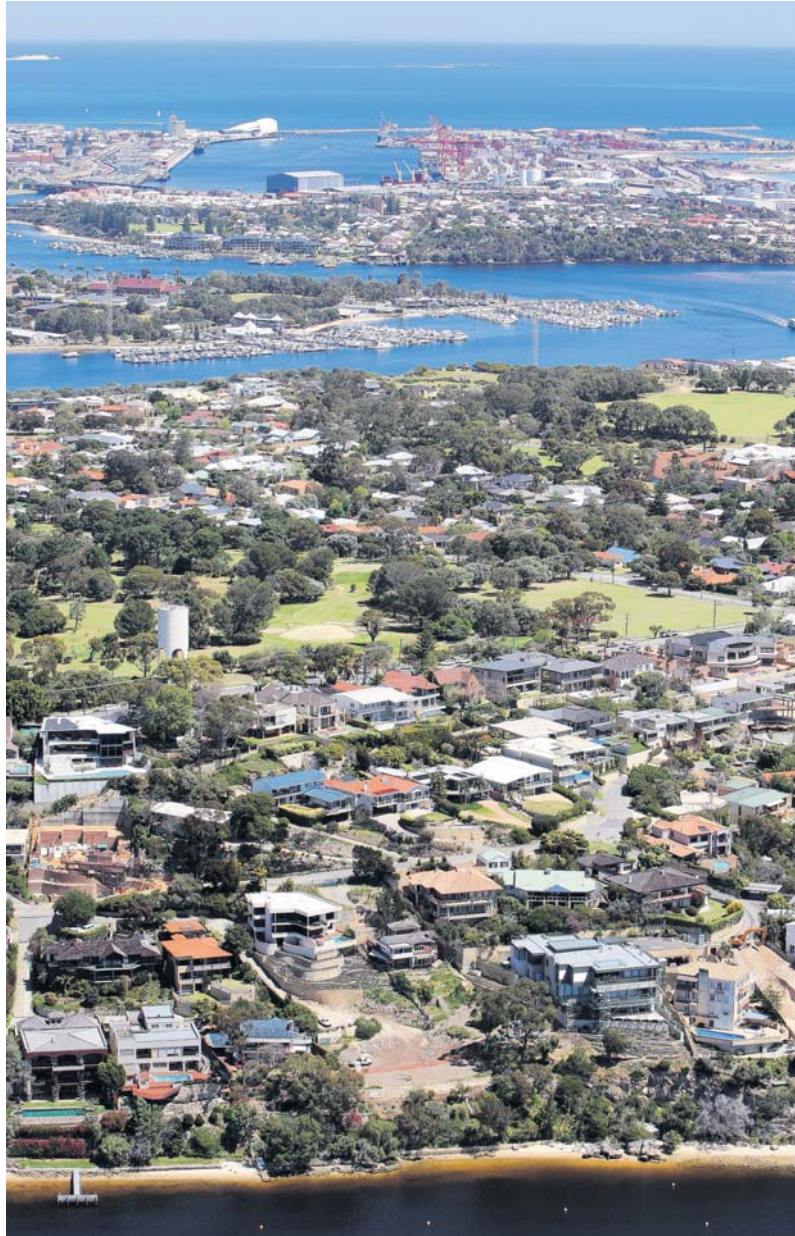


West Australian
Thursday 23/10/2014
Page: 19
Section: General News
Region: Perth Circulation: 160,197
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 755.00 sq.cms.
Frequency: MTWTF--

Brief: PARLWA-WA1
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Change delay: The proposed western suburbs merger is on hold.