

# Victorian Liberal leader ousted in further shift to right by Australian political establishment

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A new, more right-wing leader was installed to head Australia's Liberal Party opposition in the state of Victoria last Friday, backed by the Murdoch media and the most right-wing faction of the federal Liberal-National Coalition.

The party-room ouster of supposed "moderate" faction leader John Pesutto and election of Brad Battin, a "law and order" ex-police officer, marks a further political realignment not just in Victoria, the country's second most populous state, but nationally.

Murdoch's *Australian* reported on its front-page lead article on Saturday that federal Liberals, factionally aligned with Coalition leader Peter Dutton, applied "pressure" to their state counterparts to anoint Battin in the leadup to the next federal election, which must be held by mid-May.

At his first media conference, Battin pledged to cut the size of the public service, lower business taxes and boost the police. He signalled a focus on outer suburban voters in Melbourne, the state capital, rather than the affluent layers in inner-city areas that have traditionally been the main social base of the big business Liberal Party.

Like Dutton, another former police officer, Battin aims to channel US President-elect Donald Trump's victory last month, by seeking to exploit the widespread discontent over the intensifying cost-of-living and affordable housing crisis under the state and federal Labor governments, and divert it in a repressive pro-business direction.

In another signal of the political shift, Battin and his backers refused to share the state party leadership with the Liberals' "moderate" faction, as previously was the case. Another member of the right faction, ex-tennis professional Sam Groth, was elected deputy leader at the party-room meeting after that role was denied to the "moderate" wing's Jess Wilson.

Battin epitomises the turn by the Liberals, spearheaded by Dutton and backed by sections of the corporate elite, to a more repressive and social spending-slashing direction. Battin was a Victoria Police officer from 2001 to 2007,

rising to senior constable, before running a suburban bakery franchise from 2007 until his election to the state parliament in 2010.

At his media event, Battin declared that tackling an alleged crime wave and reducing the "burden" of an "out of control" government budget were his top priorities. As shadow police minister under Pesutto, Battin had already pushed an agenda framed around "zero tolerance for street crime" and harsher terms of imprisonment.

An editorial in Saturday's *Australian* threw the Murdoch media's weight behind the leadership shift and issued marching orders to the Liberals. "New Victorian Liberal leader Brad Battin has been clear on his priorities," it declared. "They are to tackle crime, fix the budget and reduce taxes. His parliamentary colleagues must fall in behind this agenda and leave behind the divisions under which John Pesutto's ambitions to become premier evaporated."

Pesutto's removal was the result of a destabilisation operation triggered by far-right state Liberal parliamentarian Moira Deeming, who successfully sued Pesutto for defamation. A Federal Court judge ruled that Pesutto had slandered Deeming by implying that she knowingly associated and sympathised with neo-Nazis, and ordered him to pay her \$300,000 in damages. Pesutto also faces hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of dollars in legal costs.

Pesutto had made comments in an attempt to distance the Liberal Party from Deeming, after neo-Nazis joined a March 2023 anti-transgender rights rally she had helped organise on the parliamentary building steps. Neo-Nazis performed Hitler salutes at the rally, causing a public outcry of opposition to such fascist displays.

Deeming was removed from the Liberals' parliamentary party room last year after launching her lawsuit against Pesutto, but Friday's state meeting also voted to readmit her. In a last-ditch bid to head off his dumping, Pesutto publicly apologised to Deeming just before Christmas. That backflip

came only a week after he cast a presiding vote to refuse to readmit her following a 14-all split in the partyroom.

Deeming is a far-right figure who has been promoted by the Murdoch media, particularly Sky News Australia presenter Peta Credlin. From 2009 to 2015, Credlin was former Coalition leader Tony Abbott's chief of staff, first as opposition leader then prime minister. Credlin is a weekly columnist with the *Australian* and News Corp Australia's Sunday tabloids, including the Sydney *Sunday Telegraph* and the Melbourne *Herald Sun*.

In a September column, Credlin pointed to the underlying far-right political agenda. She said the Deeming "saga" was "essentially about the long-term gutlessness of the Victorian Liberal parliamentary team."

Credlin also recently indicated the level of her personal involvement in the Deeming affair. She reported that she had accompanied Deeming to an unsuccessful meeting with the Victorian Liberal Party state president to seek to settle Deeming's case against Pesutto.

In one Sky News interview with Credlin, Deeming said she had been "betrayed" by the party and "relentlessly hunted" out of the party room following the anti-transgender rights rally. This echoes one of Trump's agendas. At an event for young conservatives in Phoenix, Arizona on December 22, Trump said he would sign executive orders to end "child sexual mutilation," and to "get transgender out of" the military and schools on day one of his presidency.

Deeming has a far-right public record of opposing COVID-19 vaccine mandates and abortion rights. She has stated that rape victims should reject abortions and turn to the Christian church. She is a member of the conservative think-tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, which is funded by Australia's richest oligarch, iron ore magnate Gina Rinehart, who joined Trump and Elon Musk in Florida last month to celebrate Trump's victory.

The elevation of Battin and the promotion of Deeming are in line with the demands emerging in the corporate media for an historic, all-out assault on the jobs, social services and living conditions of workers in Australia, along the lines of that being mounted by Argentine President Javier Milei and planned by Trump.

Musk, the wealthiest individual in the world, will head Trump's Department of Government Efficiency, vowing to slash \$2 trillion—or about one-third—of the annual US government budget, primarily at the expense of social welfare, health, education and environmental programs.

This agenda is an attempt to wind back the historical clock, overturning all the past gains of the working class. This requires a dramatic change in the political forms of rule by the capitalist ruling class, not just in the US but globally. The financial-corporate oligarchy is attempting to reorganise

the world, including Australia, by means of social counterrevolution and political dictatorship. The political establishment is being realigned accordingly.

A similar thrust is expected to be unveiled by Dutton when he announces a reshuffle of the Coalition's federal shadow cabinet—an event he delayed until after the leadership shift in Victoria. Dutton's reshuffle follows what the corporate media described as the surprise resignations of two leading "moderates"—foreign affairs spokesman Simon Birmingham and government services spokesman Paul Fletcher.

Reportedly, members of Dutton's "conservative" faction have been agitating for stronger representation in the shadow ministry, amid a recent wave of announcements by at least 11 Coalition members of parliament, counting Birmingham and Fletcher, that they will not recontest their seats at the impending election. That came on top of four others who have quit the Coalition since the May 2022 election.

This cleanout is accelerating a process that began with the federal Liberal party-room election of Dutton, a widely reviled hardline advocate of militarism and budget-slashing, as Coalition leader after the Labor Party scraped into office in 2022. Labor won only 32.5 percent of the national vote but was able to gain a narrow majority in the lower house of parliament, largely because the Liberal vote imploded in many of its wealthy inner-city electorates.

Since then, the Albanese Labor government has presided over the biggest fall in real wages and living standards since the 1950s, intensifying an historic four-decade decline in the share of income going to the working class. This, plus Labor's stepping up of the previous Coalition government's line-up behind US war plans, including its support for the genocide in Gaza, has opened the door for the possible election of a far-right government under Dutton.



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