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State Liberal candidate was deemed 'too extreme' for Scott Morrison's campaign



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KEY POINTS

- In March, the Victorian branch's administrative committee voted for Moira Deeming to run for the Liberals in the lower house seat of Gorton at the federal election.
- But Scott Morrison's office believed that Deeming's stances against COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine mandates were likely to generate controversy.
- Another vote was conducted and a different candidate picked, according to five sources speaking anonymously because of party rules.
- On Saturday, Deeming was chosen by Liberal Party members to replace outspoken MP Bernie Finn in the contest for the upper house western metropolitan region seat in the state election.

An anti-abortion candidate for the Victorian Liberal Party who opposes the rights of trans people was deemed too risky to run as part of former prime minister Scott Morrison's election team this year.

Melton City councillor Moira Deeming was [preselected on Saturday to replace conservative MP Bernie Finn](#) on the state upper house ticket, months after she was rejected as a candidate for the federal election for the Liberals in the lower house seat of Gorton.



Moira Deeming has been chosen by Liberal Party members to replace outspoken MP Bernie Finn in the contest for the upper house Western Metropolitan Region seat in the state election. JASON SOUTH

In March, the Victorian branch's administrative committee voted for Deeming to run in Gorton. But after the preliminary vote and before the meeting formally endorsed her, a top party official in the meeting relayed the view of Morrison's office, which was that negative media coverage of Deeming's hardline social views could distract from the then prime minister's campaign.

Another vote was conducted and a different candidate picked, according to five sources who confirmed the events of the March 26 meeting. All were speaking anonymously because party rules prohibit public commentary.

Morrison's office believed that stances Deeming had taken publicly, including against COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine mandates, were likely to generate controversy the party was unwilling to absorb for a candidate in an unwinnable seat.

A week later, [gender activist Katherine Deves](#) was handpicked by Morrison to run in the Sydney seat of Warringah, setting off weeks of national coverage of her at-times inflammatory remarks about trans people.



Prime Minister Scott Morrison was a defender of Liberal candidate for Warringah, Katherine Deves.

Deeming's [preselection on Saturday](#) for the top position on the state party's western metropolitan region ticket was also controversial within the party, according to sources speaking anonymously.

The day after the vote, a number of senior Liberals tried unsuccessfully to overturn the nomination, partly over the perception that Deeming was too hardline, but also for internal factional reasons.

Deeming, a mother of four, has said the new consciousness about gender fluidity and the implications of additional rights for trans people were her "number one issue". She was elected to Melton City Council in 2020 on a platform including advocating separate toilets for trans people and claimed the Safe Schools program aimed to prevent bullying against LGBTQ children was "sleazy, unnecessary drivel".

In December, the councillor asserted she could not support any motions related to COVID-19 mandates or vaccines because she did "not agree with either of them". "Mr Andrews, tear down these mandates," she posted on social media.



Right-wing Victorian MP Bernie Finn. JOE ARMAO

Deeming is a friend of Finn, who was [expelled from the Liberal Party's parliamentary team in May](#) for repeated unbecoming conduct, mostly on social media. The behaviour included depicting Premier Daniel Andrews as a Nazi and advocating that abortion should be prohibited for rape victims.

Finn told *The Age* it would be fair to describe Deeming, who he endorsed ahead of the preselection vote involving about 45 party members, as his protégé. He described her as intelligent and politically shrewd and said the vote proved people in Melbourne's west wanted a social conservative MP.

"People on the other side of Melbourne don't realise social conservatism in the west is very strong, even among Labor voters," he said, arguing he was a strong chance to win an upper house seat in the same western metropolitan region running as a Democratic Labour Party candidate at the November election. He currently sits in the upper house crossbench.

Finn said he aspired as a teen to be an MP for the DLP, the anti-communist Labor Party offshoot that emanated from the 1950s split but had no MPs between 1976 and 2006. Its last Victorian upper house MP lost their position at the 2018 election.

When the Liberals expelled Finn from the parliamentary party, Opposition Leader Matthew Guy said the party accepted diverse views, but he expected "people to uphold respectful discourse whatever their issues may be".

Guy said Deeming had expressed her views "in a fairly respectful way and she's entitled to have a different point of view from a lot of people."

The Age has been told Guy did not try to block Deeming's preselection once she was chosen by rank-and-file members. The devout Christian won more than twice the number of votes of her nearest rival in Saturday's vote.

[Outgoing state party president](#) Robert Clark and his allies – who were eligible to vote as party office bearers – backed her, even though they belong to faction that includes the party's more

socially liberal members. The Clark faction has been the dominant group in the party for years, partly because of its association with a hardline religious grouping led by influential Christian activist Karina Okotel. Clark himself is a socially conservative Christian.

Members of the more mainstream conservative faction, connected to federal MPs such as Michael Sukkar and powerbroker Michael Kroger, opposed her preselection but did not have enough votes to obstruct it at a meeting of the administrative committee on Sunday.

Two party figures explained that Clark and his allies did not back Deeming because they agreed with her views. Rather, they insisted the final two candidates up against her in the last round of voting were unpalatable. They included Dinesh Gourisetty, who in 2019 pleaded guilty to breaches of the food act and paid \$25,000 for running a filthy restaurant, and 69-year-old Fred Ackerman.

Another party operative added: “[Deeming] is not running for Hawthorn. Many people in migrant communities in the western suburbs would share some of her views. We’re not prepared to say there’s no room for those views in the Liberal Party. She was the most electable candidate and presented well.”

Deeming, who did not respond to repeated requests for comment, has expressed privately this week she would not be an outspoken culture warrior and would focus on policy areas such as education.

The Liberal Party’s culture places greater emphasis on the autonomy of local members to select members than does the Labor Party, whose collectivist philosophy lends itself to central decision-making. While this ethos helps to uphold principles of party democracy, it also makes it difficult for the party’s leadership to stop branch members – who may far be to the right of mainstream Victorians – picking candidates who align with their views.

A party member with local knowledge of the western suburbs said city-based and eastern suburban members underestimated Finn’s level of local support.

“Bernie is their guy. They thought he was doing a superb job and if they couldn’t have him back they’d get someone in similar vein. Now they found someone who’s even a stronger advocate on these issues,” he said.

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