

## Press Conference on 23 February 2023

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- Speakers: John Pesutto and Georgie Crozier

**PESUTTO:** Assistant Treasurer, Danny Pearson, cannot become the new normal in Victoria. Once upon a time in our great state, ministers who engaged in share trading while overseeing their own portfolios would resign in three seconds flat. Yet we have been spending the better part of a whole week pursuing Danny Pearson for basic answers, to basic questions about why he sat around a cabinet table with hundreds of thousands of dollars of shares, concerning companies in which he had shareholdings and he won't be upfront with the Victorian people. I again call on Danny Pearson and his boss, Daniel Andrews, to treat Victorians with respect and provide those basic details that we've been seeking.

Danny Pearson seems to spend more time on his share portfolio than on his ministerial portfolio, and it's not good enough. We've had cases around Australia where ministers have resigned for far less. Damien Tudehope in New South Wales, resigning because his own superannuation fund contained shares in a company which was considered by the Cabinet, of which he was a member.

Danny Pearson is an anaconda sliding through the corridors of the Andrews Government, chancing on any opportunity to make a buck off Victorians, and it's not good enough. Victoria is better than this. If this is okay, if Danny Pearson trading in shares is okay while he's a member of a cabinet that makes decisions favouring companies of which he's a part-owner, if that's okay, we've got big problems in this state. So I call on Danny Pearson and Daniel Andrews to take this seriously, answer the questions we've been asking in the Parliament this week.

I also think today revealed something else about the Andrews Government in relation to this matter. We now know that an immediate member of Danny Pearson's family holds a job on the licensing board. That board used to sit under the ministerial oversight of Danny Pearson. That position was moved shortly after Danny Pearson was sworn in as a minister after the last state election, and this could only have occurred with the signature of Daniel Andrews. So efforts were made to change the machinery of government provisions in Victoria, so Danny Pearson's family member could keep a board position and continue to earn money off taxpayers and it was all done with Daniel Andrews' signature.

We'll be seeking more answers from Daniel Andrews and Danny Pearson in relation to this matter but this can't be what Victoria is about. Integrity, governance, probity, all on behalf of taxpayers and for the benefit of taxpayers matters too much for this matter to go without any consequence. Danny Pearson has apologised this week for something that he is continuing to do. He's apologising for owning shares that he will continue to own and profit from. And

that can't be good enough. It can't be good enough in Victoria, the Victoria we all love and cherish.

I'll hand over to Georgie and then take some questions.

**CROZIER:** Thanks very much, John. Well, this week we introduced a bill, first read a bill, about greater transparency for health data.

We know that Victoria's health system remains in crisis. We know that tens of thousands of Victorians are waiting in pain, languishing on long wait lists.

We know that tens of thousands more Victorians are waiting to get on that wait list. We also know that the Government will go to great lengths to hide from the Victorian public that data.

So we want greater transparency in this issue, and that's why I first read a bill in relation to this very important matter. We want greater transparency, greater accountability from the Andrews Government, and every Victorian, and more specifically, every Victorian waiting for surgery, waiting for an ambulance, waiting for dental care, deserve this information.

On another matter, in relation to the information sharing bill, which has got increasing attention around what the Government is proposing, it's been put into the lower house and it'll be coming to our house in the next week.

There are increasing concerns from various advocate groups and we've made it very clear that the government should enable an opt-out system. It should enable an ability for a Victorian to FOI the health department about their own patient information. Not every jurisdiction has a blanket rule like this Government wants to do here in Victoria. Queensland has an opt-out system. The Commonwealth has an opt-out system. So when the government tells you that it happens in other states, just remember there are opt-out provisions and this bill needs to have an opt-out provision too, for those Victorians who have sensitive patient information that they want protected and not shared. And I call on the Government to reconsider this. It's a very important matter and I think it goes to the heart of patient autonomy and the rights of Victorians.

**PESUTTO:** Thanks, Georgie. Questions?

**JOURNALIST:** Just to be clear, are you calling Danny Pearson a snake?

**PESUTTO:** Well ... I think ... Danny Pearson, let's remember, Danny Pearson was a former corporate lobbyist. He knows how to slide through the corridors of power.

**JOURNALIST:** You called him an anaconda though.

**PESUTTO:** Well, I think he moves like an anaconda. He moves like an anaconda around the corridors of power. And if you saw the contempt that

Danny Pearson showed, not only to the chamber when we were asking questions, but in the way he was dismissing questions we were asking on behalf of the Victorian people.

Just think about this for a moment. He's a senior Minister of the Crown. He's sitting around a Cabinet table while that Cabinet considers multi-million dollar matters concerning companies he partly owns. And he doesn't recuse himself, or won't provide any details to show that he recused himself. We asked him so many times this week, give us information about whether you recused yourself from important Cabinet decisions that affected companies you own, companies whose share price went up because of decisions the Government made.

They're basic decisions and once upon a time in Victoria a minister who did that would be dismissed or resign in seconds flat. And now we have a minister who's bunkered down pleading the fifth to basic questions that Victorians are entitled to know the answers to.

So yeah Simon I think it's a fair question and yeah the answer's fair too. He moves like an anaconda around the corridors of the Andrews Government.

**JOURNALIST:** What evidence do you actually have of him trading these shares?

**PESUTTO:** It's on his share register, his own register of interests that you all have access to. You can access those documents and the Opposition will happily provide these documents. They're independently available so you can get them independently if you want.

But those documents show the shares he owns and so we have done a lot of work tracking those shares against major government decisions affecting those companies and which affected them in positive ways.

So if you look at the Commonwealth Bank, it was appointed to a three-bank banking services financial panel that the Government set up in 2021, a year after Danny Pearson became a minister.

The whole thing stinks. A minister with shares in companies that were benefiting from decisions his own government made and that he was a part owner of.

**JOURNALIST:** Do you have any shares or have you checked if anyone of your party has any shares that could cause a conflict?

**PESUTTO:** I don't have any shares personally. I've always believed for my part that it's better not to have shares. But as I'm advised, all of my colleagues who do have shares have properly disclosed those.

And remember we're in opposition, and whilst there are very important obligations to disclose those for the register, my understanding is that that has been done. But that remember, we are in opposition too.

**JOURNALIST:** Does Moira Deeming have your full support?

**PESUTTO:** Sorry?

**JOURNALIST:** Does Moira Deeming have your full support?

**PESUTTO:** Moira Deeming is a member of the Parliamentary Party, and she'll remain so.

**JOURNALIST:** Do you agree with her views?

**PESUTTO:** It depends on what views you're talking about.

Let me talk about my views. I think Victorians and all of you know me to be somebody who believes in an inclusive Victoria where all of us are equal, all of us deserve opportunities, no matter what our skin colour, no matter what our faith, no matter what our sexual orientation or identity. I love everybody, and I want to be a strong voice for everybody, and I was elected leader of the Victorian Liberal Party with everybody knowing what sort of liberal I am.

I'm a modern liberal, a progressive modern liberal who wants every Victorian, no matter what your sexual preference, no matter what your identity, no matter what your faith, no matter what your activity, I will be a strong voice for you. And I say this to every Victorian, the Liberal Party I lead is one that wants to be a voice for everyone, no matter what your circumstances, no matter where you have come from. I and my colleagues, we will be that voice for all Victorians.

**JOURNALIST:** Prior to the last election, James Newbury, the shadow equality spokesperson, made an iron-clad guarantee that he would not change the gay conversion legislation that's passed the Parliament. Are you maintaining that you will guarantee that you won't be changing it?

**PESUTTO:** Yes, we have no plans to change that legislation and I think that was made clear at the time.

**JOURNALIST:** On abortion law reform, no plans to change abortion laws?

**PESUTTO:** No plans. No plans to change those laws.

**JOURNALIST:** Have you spoken to Moira about her comments, about how they might reflect on the party?

**PESUTTO:** I've had a discussion with Moira and I'll continue to have a discussion with Moira about those issues. She wants to be a member of the team, I know. You know, she's made that clear to me that she wants to be a member of the team. So, I've had some good discussions with her today and I think she understands the importance of us working as a team and I look forward to having further discussions in the future.

**JOURNALIST:** She says she wants to push for an inquiry into gender transition therapies and the like. Is that something you want her to be pushing in the upper house during this term?

**PESUTTO:** No. No, we've made our position clear on the legislation, that we supported the legislation at the time and that matter's been settled.

**JOURNALIST:** Is it hypocritical for you or your party to march at Pride and then in the same breath have someone like Moira in the upper house?

**PESUTTO:** I strongly support the LGBTI community.

I was proud to march at the Pride march recently and people of all different backgrounds will bring different views to things but I am a strong supporter of Victoria's LGBTI community, will continue to be so.

**JOURNALIST:** Is the Liberal Party a safe place for members of the LGBTI community?

**PESUTTO:** Absolutely, it's safe. And if I could have, I would have brought Joe McCracken here today. He's a member of our team, and as you know, gave an important and very moving speech last week. He's a member of our team and will have a bright future in the Liberal Party.

**JOURNALIST:** How does Joe McCracken feel about Moira Deeming's comments?

**PESUTTO:** I haven't spoken to—

**JOURNALIST:** As a colleague?

**PESUTTO:** I haven't spoken to Joe today.

**JOURNALIST:** You've got two colleagues in the Legislative Council that couldn't be further apart on these sorts of issues. I mean, how do you accommodate them?

**PESUTTO:** I don't know that that's a fair assessment of either of those upper house members, but I'll let them speak for how they interact with each other.

**JOURNALIST:** Should you speak to him though, about those comments that Moira made? He might be hurt by them. Is it important for you to reach out to him?

**PESUTTO:** I talk regularly with all of my colleagues and I'll be speaking to Joe, if not today, I'm sure tomorrow and the coming days. We speak regularly.

**JOURNALIST:** Your party only just recently celebrated the fact that Joe McCracken came out in his inaugural speech, let alone now, having these comments from Moira Deeming. Isn't that just damaging for the Liberal brand in Victoria to have this sort of conjecture between colleagues?

**PESUTTO:** Yeah, yeah. Joe McCracken gave a terrific speech.

You might say he gave a cracker of a speech and it was an emotionally moving speech. It moved all of us who watched it and we're all very proud of Joe and we enjoy having him as a colleague and I look forward to working with him.

**JOURNALIST:** A few weeks ago, you committed to make sure that all the candidates you choose are people with standings that the Victorian people deserve and expect. Does Moira meet those standards?

**PESUTTO:** Well, Moira was pre-selected by the Liberal Party last year. She's a member of our team, and she'll go forward as a member of that team. What I can promise you all, is that someone like Danny Pearson, someone who trades in shares whilst he's a minister who stands to gain profits out of government decisions, he wouldn't qualify for Liberal Party pre-selection.

**JOURNALIST:** If you had your time again, would you pre-select Moira?

**PESUTTO:** I'm not gonna engage in hypotheticals.

What I will say is that as leader of the Victorian Liberal Party, Victorians know what kind of liberal I am and my colleagues know what kind of liberal I am. I'm progressive, I'm modern, I'm inclusive. I love everybody and want everybody to have opportunities in our great state.

**JOURNALIST:** FOI documents released last night said that during that preselection process, Moira Deeming offered \$100,000 in donations to the Liberal Party and some discounts on printing and the like. Is that not akin to buying a seat?

**PESUTTO:** I don't believe that's the case, but to be candid with you, I haven't had a full briefing. There are many documents in that and I understand some of the contents are disputed around that so I'll leave that to the process of going through and vetting that.

**JOURNALIST:** Are you concerned for the potential of donation breaches out of that?

**PESUTTO:** I have nothing across my desk that would suggest any problems.

**JOURNALIST:** Will you chase that up though?

**PESUTTO:** I'm focusing on holding the Andrews Government to account. If a matter is brought to my attention I will deal with it as always, but nothing's been brought to my attention as yet.

**JOURNALIST:** There was a historical parallel that someone gave me today, Andrew Elsbury, who was also a Member for the Western Metropolitan Region. In his first speech, a couple of years ago now, he came out really strongly against abortion, and Ted Baillieu the next day, came out and said, I condemn those views, that's not my views. Why weren't you out immediately after Moira Deeming made her speech with, you know, similarly [unintelligible] views?

**PESUTTO:** Yeah, look, I've made it clear that as a Liberal leader, I believe an inclusive Victoria, one where all Victorians can feel safe and feel empowered by the opportunities I want to help secure for all Victorians, no matter what their background.

I have to tell you, this week I have been fully immersed on the Danny Pearson scandal and Daniel Andrews' role in that Danny Pearson scandal. So, there's a lot going on this week and I should emphasise this is really important, if this standard, remember this is from a senior Minister of the Crown, if this becomes normal in Victoria then we've got big problems because that means ministers around Daniel Andrews' Cabinet table can get a green light to earn profits off shares in companies they are voting on as they sit around the cabinet table.

That's the most important issue I've been dealing with this week and I'm going to continue to prosecute the case against Danny Pearson.

**JOURNALIST:** Danny Pearson has come through doors three times and fronted up and taken questions. Daniel Andrews has come through doors and taken questions. Why haven't you been through doors this week?

**PESUTTO:** You'll understand that when we prepare our day there are a lot of materials to go through in terms of Danny Pearson.

So we've been working through a lot of this voluminously and I think all of you know it doesn't take much to get me in front of a camera. So I'm not scared of questions any time.

You people know because I'm always haranguing you to get opportunities to get on air. I'll continue to do that but this week I've been focused on the Danny Pearson scandal and that really has taken a lot of work because Danny Pearson and Daniel Andrews were never going to make it easy for anybody to find any of this out.

So I hope you'll all understand, it's taken a lot of work from my colleagues and my staff in particular who I tip my hat off to, to my staff, who've actually had to laboriously go through documents to try and unearth everything that Danny Pearson and Daniel Andrews have tried to conceal from the Victorian people.

**JOURNALIST:** With all due respect, we're at doors from 8am sometimes through until 10 and you didn't turn up at all. Can you make a commitment to turn up at doors to take questions?

**PESUTTO:** I will, if it makes you all happy, I'll come through the doors. You know I like talking to you, I don't think you've ever felt me not want to talk to you. So if it makes you happy, I'll come to the doors, don't worry about that.

**JOURNALIST:** Also, you say that you want ... you know, you're happy to be on camera, though when I came to your office on Tuesday asking for a response as to why you

voted a certain way in the pre-selection committee on Tuesday night, didn't get a response for some hours. So, just on that, what was your decision to David Davis in terms of the Aston by-election? Did you ask him to vote for Roshena Campbell?

**PESUTTO:** Oh, I'm not going to go into decisions that are subject to our pre-selection process. That was an admin pre-selection, I'm not going to go into that.

But Simon, you know I always get back to you. Sometimes, I don't get back to you straight away, but I think you all know, I do respect all of you. You know I respect you all enormously. I get back to you as soon as I can, but again, in response to your question, Simon, as per the earlier one, we've had to spend a lot of time on this Danny Pearson scandal, and it just takes a lot of time, and I'm sorry I couldn't return the call, but I did eventually. I'll always reach out to you. You know, I love talking to you guys.

**JOURNALIST:** Just on Aston, are you worried that some of the debates within the party in regards to the Moira Deeming scandal and these debates on issues that are maybe seen as the far right or conservative arm of the party could hurt the federal branch's chances in Aston?

**PESUTTO:** I think Rashena Campbell is a terrific candidate. She could be a star on the national stage and I really hope and trust that she will run a terrific campaign and we'll see her elected to the federal Parliament.

She will make a terrific contribution. I'm confident that she is going to prosecute the case around cost of living inaction by the Albanese Government to really deliver support for families that are struggling at this time.

She's going to focus on those issues and I really look forward to and hope that she's able to secure election to the Federal parliament.

**JOURNALIST:** Can I just clarify, do you condemn Moira Deeming's views?

**PESUTTO:** I don't agree with those views.

Everybody knows I'm a very inclusive leader. I believe in a Victoria where all Victorians have an opportunity to reach their full potential no matter what their background.

I'll let Moira speak to her views but my position on these issues is clear and has been for a long time. Everybody knows me and that I'm a modern progressive liberal who believes in these values and I'll make sure that under my leadership we will be a strong voice for all Victorians no matter what their background.