

Politics Victoria [Liberal Party](#)

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How a polite request blew up into a full-blown Liberal crisis



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Over the past five weeks, Moira Deeming has asked two things of the Liberal Party she was elected to represent and abruptly suspended from.

The first was a formal, written record of exactly what the Liberal party room meeting had discussed and decided about her on March 27, [the day she was suspended but avoided expulsion](#).



Moira Deeming likely faces a new expulsion motion after issuing an ultimatum to Liberal leader John Pesutto. STEPHEN KIPRILLIS

The second was a document she considers central to the settlement she and leader John Pesutto reached on the day of the meeting – a joint statement making clear that, although [she attended a March 18 Let Women Speak Rally gatecrashed by neo-Nazis](#), she had no association with them and did not share their hateful sentiments towards trans people.

Until Wednesday, veteran Liberal MPs Kim Wells and David Southwick had been negotiating – Wells as an emissary for Deeming and Southwick as a member of Pesutto’s leadership team – to resolve this issue and put to rest a protracted dispute distracting the party from its central task of keeping the Andrews government honest.

The previous Sunday night, amid growing concerns that loose ends relating to Deeming could badly fray at the next party room meeting, Wells and Southwick swapped various drafts of a proposed joint statement, to be stamped with the Liberal letterhead and issued under the names of Pesutto and Deeming, which would finally draw a line under this episode.

A draft of the proposed statement read in part: “We affirm that all claims ... that associate Moira with violence, prejudice, hate, odious actions and/or far right extremist groups were made without any basis and are retracted unequivocally and in full.”

Any chance of such a statement seeing the light of day came to an end at 6.45am [on Thursday, when Deeming fired off an email threatening the party with legal action](#) unless it met a 2pm deadline to satisfy her requests.

Later that morning, a frustrated David Southwick walked into Kim Wells’ parliamentary office, where Deeming was waiting, and declared the negotiations at an end. Deeming questioned whether they had ever been real.

“That is when negotiations fell apart,” an MP familiar with the negotiations but speaking on condition of anonymity said. “They weren’t going to negotiate with a gun held to their head.”

The gun is now pointed back at [Deeming, who next week faces a likely expulsion motion before a party room furious at this turn of events](#). Not for the first time, the Victorian Liberal Party is asking itself how on earth it arrived at such a place.

While the answer varies depending on who you talk to within the opposition’s bitterly divided parliamentary ranks, the best place to start is at the March 27 party room meeting.



Deeming exits the Liberal party room after surviving a push for her expulsion on March 27. DARRIAN TRAYNOR

Minutes of that meeting first published by *The Australian* – more accurately described as a transcript taken from a recording – show how the party was torn from the outset between wanting to support [their newly elected leader](#) and be fair to an MP accused of being something she wasn't.

[Pesutto wanted Deeming out of the party](#) and declared it a test of his leadership. Other MPs who spoke at the meeting pointed out the problem inherent in what they were being asked to do.

“I read the motion, I do not agree for a minute that Moira is a neo-Nazi,” upper house MP Nick McGowan said, according to the minutes.

“If this motion is successful today, you are actually labelling someone a Nazi. Moira is going to have to live with that. It's like calling someone a murderer, a rapist [or] a paedophile.”



Pesutto and wife Betty arrive at the state funeral for Father Bob Maguire at St Patrick's Cathedral on Friday. JUSTIN MCMANUS

To the relief of most MPs in the room, a compromise position was reached. The allegations against Deeming would be dropped, she would accept a nine-month suspension and in return, Pesutto and the MP would issue a joint statement making it clear she was not accused of being a neo-Nazi or Nazi sympathiser.

The problem was, a joint statement was never agreed to, much less issued.

March 27 was the last time the party room met before Tuesday this week. In the intervening five weeks, Deeming wrote to the party three times asking to be provided minutes from the meeting and the conditions of her suspension.

By April 26, the date of her third request, Deeming's tone had shifted from polite to something more ominous.

"I have sought legal advice and am informed that I have an absolute right to have a copy of the suspension conditions and the minutes (even if they are drafts) for my confidential records," she wrote. "I am extremely unhappy that I have not been provided with these."

Deeming became angrier still after she learned that at Tuesday's meeting, one of her strongest supporters, party secretary Renee Heath, was blamed for the unusually expansive form in which the minutes had belatedly been produced.

An MP reflected on Friday that had a joint statement been issued the day after the March 27 meeting, this week's crisis would have been avoided.

"What started as a smouldering cigarette in the armrest of a plane has blown the wings off."



Deeming at the Let Women Speak rally outside Parliament House on March 18. YOUTUBE

Other MPs lay blame squarely with Deeming. “There are so many issues going on in this state and we are talking about this rubbish,” said one.

Another group of MPs believes that Deeming is being manipulated by Pesutto’s political rivals. Yet, as things stood on Friday afternoon, there was no active challenge to Pesutto’s leadership, only a threat of legal action and the promise of more blood-letting when the party next meets.

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