

TOM ELLIOTT

While it's safe to say, it's been a pretty dramatic morning in state politics; there was a move to kick Moira Deeming, the outspoken Liberal MP, out of the party. And it seems that since then, some sort of a deal has been done. She's now being suspended, not kicked out. It all goes back two weeks to the pro-women, dare I say, anti-trans rally that was gate crashed by Neo Nazis. Anyway, joining us live in the studio is the state opposition leader, John Pesutto. Mr Pesutto, good afternoon.

JOHN PESUTTO

G'day Tom.

TOM ELLIOTT

So, a week ago, you wanted to kick Moira Deeming out of the party. Now, you're just suspending her for nine months. What changed?

JOHN PESUTTO

Yes, some new information came to light early this morning, along with a very extended and emotional party room meeting today. And I wanted to say, Tom, that the information that came in today was what I was looking for all along. Now, it didn't come in in time. And I would have much preferred it, in fact, I demanded it, you know, from last Sunday, that's the Sunday night meeting you might have heard about. So, I wanted some information. That information was really just calling out the behaviour that I was concerned about, in terms of some of the organisers having said and done things on social media and the like, and I just wanted them called out. Now, that didn't happen until this morning. That, along with the long and fairly, very emotional party remaining for many of the members there. I took everything into account, given that I got that information, then I really thought about it as a leader. And I thought, well, we've got what we wanted, but there needs to be a consequence attached.

TOM ELLIOTT

But what is the information?

JOHN PESUTTO

Well, it relates to ... well, all it is really is a condemnation of, for example, the use on social media of Nazi symbolism in some of the social media platforms that one of the organisers with whom Moira had worked in terms of the rally had used. Not Moira herself, but that one of the organisers. And I was concerned that, as a member of the Liberal Party team, we can't be associated that because my vision for the party and the principles I want to employ in leading it are that we are inclusive, we are engaging, we are welcoming. So, I'm not going to have that. And Moira got that. And she made a statement this morning, which includes what I've been after all along.

TOM ELLIOTT

So, you want her to condemn things or symbols that other people said or put on their social media profiles?

JOHN PESUTTO

Sort of; it's a bit more than that. It was because Moira had joined in a rally with them. I was concerned that that was indirectly being linked to us. And I wanted to make it clear to the Victorian people that that's not on for us. And I welcomed what Moira did this morning, it was the right thing to do. I just wish it had been done last week.

TOM ELLIOTT

So, can Moira now still have her views like, for example, that, you know, women's spaces should not be open to trans women or biological males; is she still allowed to have those views?

JOHN PESUTTO

Of course, there's allowed to be a debate. I never said this was about free speech. In fact, I said the opposite. It was not about free speech.

TOM ELLIOTT

But to a lot of people, it looks like free speech.

JOHN PESUTTO

I know and for all of our listeners, I want to assure everybody listening, that was never the point. It was never my concern here. My main concern, as I've just said to you was more about the linking to the use by others of symbols. But also, Tom, I do want to make it clear that as Victoria's alternative Premier, and hopefully one day as the leader of this State, I want to make it clear the party I'm leading, and the team I've got around me is totally committed to that inclusive party I talk about. And the other thing I'll just say very quickly, Tom, is that it's okay, in fact, it's necessary to have debates about complex social issues. I'm all for that. The only thing I insist upon, broadly, right across the board is that when we have these discussions, they're civil and respectful, and they're inclusive. And people are going to disagree.

TOM ELLIOTT

Okay, but I mean, you can't have a position that includes everyone, for example, I mean, Moira Deeming, I don't want to speak for her, but she and some of the other people she's associated with have said, 'Look, women's rights are for women.' And the argument is what is a woman? Is it a biological woman? Is it a man who declares himself a woman? Is it someone who's had a sex change? And in a variety of areas like rape crisis centres, like women's refuges, like girls' sport, we are crossing a line by allowing biological men, albeit they've declared themselves to be women. Now, what I'm saying is, can she still hold those views? You are gonna offend people; the trans lobby will be upset at this and are upset. You can't include everybody. Can Moira Deeming still hold those views?

JOHN PESUTTO

I'm not there to police people's views. I'm there to make sure that the debates we have are respectful. Now, if you look at what's happening around the world, international sporting bodies are dealing with this, schools are dealing with this every day of the week. And they're managing people within their communities who have very different views. In a major political party like the Liberal Party, even the Labor Party, if they're honest, will tell you they

have different views across the board. My job as a leader. And this is what I've always believed is that the job of the leader of a political party must be to encourage internal debate, but also to make it clear that that debate doesn't include excluding people to the point where they're being vilified. Now, I'm not saying that's what Moira did, but more generally, it's important to make sure the debate is open for everyone.

TOM ELLIOTT

So, is her sin that she turned up to a rally where some not very nice people also turned up?

JOHN PESUTTO

No, it's a bit more than that. And I again, I just want to assure our listeners, because I know, listeners had very strong views on this, it was not about people having differences of opinion. My concern with Moira, and the reason for the motion, was that I wanted a condemnation of specific things that we'd identified, for example, on social media, Twitter and the like. Once they'd been condemned, as they were this morning, I was satisfied that at the party meeting, there was a different outcome that we could seek.

TOM ELLIOTT

Well, why suspend her then? I mean if she's condemned the things you wanted her to condemn, that's on the record, why suspend her at all?

JOHN PESUTTO

Because there was an overwhelming view in the party room, in fact, it was unanimous, that there needed to be a consequence for not acting on it sooner. Because Tom, as leader, I'm very, very sensitive to our brand, our reputation, our standing in the community. And I want all Victorians to know; many will be listening, coming from different types of families. I want them to know that in the Liberal Party I lead, they're all welcome. Right? And there needed to be a consequence.

TOM ELLIOTT

Righto. Have you told your MPs now? Or is the message, 'Don't go to rallies, don't stand up and go to anything public where someone who, I don't know, the party doesn't like also turns up?

JOHN PESUTTO

No, that's not the message I'm sending to my party. My message –

TOM ELLIOTT

Is that the message that has been sent, perhaps?

JOHN PESUTTO

No, no, the message I've sent to the party room is, yes, engage in debate, but make sure our associations are with people we can respect and whose values we can uphold.

TOM ELLIOTT

But to be fair, you can't control who turns up. I mean, they organised a rally to talk about women's rights and some Neo Nazis turned up. Now, you know, I could go to a rally and some weirdos could turn up as well. Does that mean I'm guilty by association?

JOHN PESUTTO

No, no, I had said in the media that when you see something like as an MP, I think it's important to leave, make sure there's law enforcement there to manage the situation. By the way, they need more powers. No, that wasn't the issue that drove the motion. The motion I brought last week, which has now been resolved with unanimous support of the party room, was more about the fellow organisers of the rally who had said certain things on social media.

TOM ELLIOTT

So, Katherine Deves, for example?

JOHN PESUTTO

No, it actually didn't concern Katherine Deves. It was more about the Kellie Jay-Keen and Angie Jones. And there were a few things they'd done that I'd wanted Moira to call out. And she did that in her submission to the party room this morning. And once I saw that, I began to think, well, we may have a way through this. And we did.

TOM ELLIOTT

Obviously, you're aware that the last Liberal government on mainland Australia was voted out of office on Saturday – the New South Wales Government, formerly headed by Dominic Perrottet. And then you've got this argument within the party down here in Victoria. What does the Liberal brand stand for now? And why don't people want to vote for it?

JOHN PESUTTO

I'll tell you what it stands for under my leadership. It stands for an enterprising culture, because the benefits of an enterprising culture for each and all improves our situation as a community and for families. The rule of law, what I mean by the rule of law is that we're all treated equally before the law, right? I believe in strength for communities and families and their pursuit of happiness. These are broad principles and values that I have. And rewarding honest effort with rewards that incentivise people to contribute to their community.

TOM ELLIOTT

Righto.

JOHN PESUTTO

They're the broad values.

TOM ELLIOTT

How do you turn those into policies and a party that people want to put back into government?

JOHN PESUTTO

Yep. So, under my leadership, it's about policies that will speak to small business, it's about policies that will assure the Victorian people, for example, that we're not going to blow a whole heap of money in a budget blowout on major projects. It means that when we say we're going to invest in health, we're going to use your money to invest in health to actually get the services, we're not going. On integrity, if I can just talk about that, we're not going to politicise the public service with Labor mates, we're going to make sure that appointments are based on merit, and we're going to make sure we're not going to stand for corruption. I mean, at the moment, we've got a corrupt Government, with a Minister who sits around a cabinet table profiting from decisions.

TOM ELLIOTT

But at the same time you're saying all this, you just had a week or two of internal disruption of one part of the party, or the party fighting with one of its newest MPs. Now, that's not really going to help things very much, is it?

JOHN PESUTTO

But, Tom, if I can put it this way. If I can offer you a different perspective. It's about me showing the Victorian people that I have a vision for where I want my party to be and I have values and principles that drive me and I know it wasn't pleasant viewing, but what I ask the Victorian people to take into account is that as a new leader, I'm establishing the direction and the values and the principles that will drive me going forward. And I want all of them to know that, although that wasn't pretty – I know that – I'm committed to making sure the party is inclusive.

TOM ELLIOTT

But see, a lot of the people who have called me over the past couple of weeks on this issue, feel like that if they have, and by the way, I support a lot of what Moira Deeming had to say. And I'm suddenly thinking, you know, like, and a lot of people who ring up say, 'I'm a Liberal Party voter, I have issues with trans people invading women's spaces.' And now they're not sure quite where you stand on the issue. And they want to know.

JOHN PESUTTO

Yeah, and I've said already in the last week, that there is a legitimate discussion to be had, and policy to be considered around protecting women's safety. Women raise that issue with me all the time. And it is an issue that can't be dismissed. And I've always said this is an incredibly difficult space. It's complex. But I'm convinced that when you look at say, for example, the recent international sporting decisions on this, they look at fairness as a guide to it and I think they've arrived at a fairly fair outcome. So –

TOM ELLIOTT

How was Moira after you suspended her for nine months today?

JOHN PESUTTO

I was at least pleased that she saw the merit in the outcome I'd proposed, because the alternative was it would go to a vote.

TOM ELLIOTT

Will she be let back into the party after nine months?

JOHN PESUTTO

Moira's future's in her hands. And I hope that this whole experience has given her an encouragement to look at things a bit different. And she is, and she has to her credit, but she did provide the –

TOM ELLIOTT

But does it mean ... has she had to agree to do or not do certain things between now and the end of the year to be allowed back into the party?

JOHN PESUTTO

Well, not explicitly. Implicit in the outcome, which is a nine-month suspension, she loses the whip's position. Now, for our listeners, that's just an important role in the upper house where she helps organise our speakers in the upper house on bills. So, she's lost a couple of very important positions. It's more implicit in the nine months going forward. So, the nine months kicks in today. And –

TOM ELLIOTT

So, Christmas, she's allowed back in?

JOHN PESUTTO

Yeah, but you know, her future's in her hands, and there are a lot of people in the party who want to work with Moira to see her, you know, move on from what's happened in the last week.

TOM ELLIOTT

Is she upset with you personally?

JOHN PESUTTO

Well, I hope not. I'm responsible as leader and I'm determined as leader to make sure that our standing in the community is one where people feel that we can be a voice for them. And I'm not going to have any kind of, if you like, activity, or if you like, rallies, or whatever it might be, where the party's standing might be brought into question. Now, that wasn't necessarily Moira's fault. I'm not saying she was responsible for that. The issue always was as a co-organiser, or someone who helped organise that, were we linked indirectly with what some of the other organisers had done? So, I think there's a way forward. The decision today that I put to the party room was actually unanimously supported. So, as tough as it was, it ended on a unanimous note.

TOM ELLIOTT

John Pesutto, thank you for your time.

JOHN PESUTTO

My pleasure.