



Victorian politics

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'Voters don't want a culture war': Victorian Liberals raise concerns over preselections

Candidates include Evan Mulholland from the Institute of Public Affairs and Moira Deeming, who called for abortion laws to be repealed

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Several Victorian Liberal MPs have raised concerns the preselection of candidates at the weekend could undermine efforts to present as a more progressive party ahead of the November state election.

Evan Mulholland, from the right-leaning Institute of Public Affairs, was preselected on Sunday for the top spot on the [Liberal party](#) ticket for the upper house Northern Metropolitan Region, replacing Craig Ondarchie. This came after Melton city councillor Moira Deeming was endorsed for the Western Metropolitan Region on Saturday.

Deeming will replace Bernie Finn who was [booted from the parliamentary Liberal party in May](#) following a post on Facebook where he called for abortion to be banned, even for survivors of rape.

Guardian Australia does not suggest Deeming shares Finn's views. However, Deeming has described abortion as a ["terrible evil"](#) and has called for the repeal of [abortion law in Australia](#).

Deeming, a qualified teacher, has also been critical of the Safe Schools program, describing the content as "sleazy", and has called for separate toilets for transgender people.

"You would have thought the party had learned from the Katherine Deves experience, especially in a more progressive state like Victoria," said one Liberal MP, who asked not to be named so they could speak freely.

"Voters don't want a culture war."

At the recent federal election Katherine Deves became a lightning rod for criticism [over her comments about transgender people](#) on her personal website and Twitter page. She had been [handpicked by a special committee](#), which included then prime minister Scott Morrison, to run in the seat of Warringah, but lost to independent Zali Steggall.

Mulholland, meanwhile, has been a vocal critic of climate targets, placing him at odds with the opposition leader, Matthew Guy, who earlier this month announced the Coalition will legislate an emission reduction target of 50% by 2030 as well as a pathway to net zero by 2050.

Another Liberal party source said Mulholland should not be compared to Deeming, given he was a "classical Liberal" focused on policy rather than social issues.

They said Mulholland pitched a plan to branch members to help the party become more competitive in Melbourne's northern suburbs, make housing more affordable for young people and other "bread and butter" state issues such as infrastructure and education. Climate targets were not raised.

"He has been a part of the community for years, he was genuinely the hardest working candidate in the race," they said.

An MP said despite the preselection of Deeming and Mulholland, the party would continue to pursue progressive social and environmental policies.

They said the leadership team was "absolutely" committed to providing Victorians with a genuine, modern alternative to the Labor government come November.

In the North Eastern Metropolitan Region, former staffer for premier Ted Baillieu, Nick McGowan, was selected for the winnable second spot, beating out former member for Chisholm Gladys Liu and oncologist Ranjana Srivastava, a columnist for the Guardian.

McGowan's preselection went against the wishes of MP Bruce Atkinson, the long-serving Liberal MP for Eastern Metropolitan, which has been renamed North Eastern

Metropolitan.

Announcing his retirement earlier this year, Atkinson said he wanted an “outstanding woman” to replace him and backed Srivastava.

A Liberal MP said the party had a “problem” when it came to preselecting female candidates.

“We know if we truly want to represent Victorians we need more women in the party, we know we need more diverse people in the party and here we had two outstanding women - one even had the retiring MP’s support - and it still didn’t happen,” they said.

The Victorian health minister, Mary-Anne Thomas, said she was “outraged” at Deeming’s preselection.

“What we’ve seen here is a political party that made a big song and dance about kicking out Bernie Finn. And now they’ve preselected a Bernie Finn clone,” she said.

“Here in Victoria, we believe that abortion is a healthcare service.”

The opposition said Thomas’s comments were intended to deflect from problems in the state’s health sector and integrity issues uncovered in a scathing report into the Victorian [Labor party](#), released last week.

“What she should be outraged about is the parlous state of Victoria’s health system and the fact of widespread rorting and corruption overseen by the government which she is a part of,” opposition health spokeswoman, Georgie Crozier, said.

Guy said Deeming had expressed her views in a respectful way and was entitled to have a different point of view to the government.

“In the Liberal party, we actually pride ourselves in people having different points of view,’ he said.

Asked if he had concerns about Deeming, the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, said any “weaponised” political debate was harmful to the LGBTQ+ community.

“I’m not here to comment on the Liberal party and some of the transphobic, homophobic and frankly ... un-Victorian kind of hatred,” he told reporters on Sunday. “It just doesn’t work.

“We’re all equal, we all should be respected. We all should be safe. We all should be valued for who we are and we shouldn’t have to be hiding who we are. We shouldn’t have to be fearful that we’re not going to be accepted.”

Finn, who has been an upper house MP since 2006, will lead the Democratic Labour party into the state election.

Guardian Australia contacted Deeming for comment.

Mulholland declined to comment, citing party rules.

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