



## Victoria state election 2022

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# Victorian Liberals raise 'faith values' and Labor-style broad appeal in jostle for party's leadership

Ryan Smith confirms he would reinstate controversial MP Renee Heath to the party room while John Pesutto urges the party to connect 'more widely'

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Two leadership aspirants of the Victorian Liberals have offered their alternative visions for the party's future after Saturday's **crushing election loss** - with one spruiking his "broad appeal" and the other vowing to protect "faith values" and limiting the impact of climate policies on outer suburban households.

The Liberal's candidate in Hawthorn, John Pesutto, and the Warrandyte MP, Ryan Smith, have emerged as frontrunners for the party's leadership after Matthew Guy announced he would step down from the role.

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Smith, a former banker, said the party should look towards the outer suburbs, noting double-digit swings towards the Liberals in Labor-held seats including Broadmeadows, Greenvale, Mill Park, St Albans and Yan Yean.

“That tells me that we have a set of values and a message that is resonating with these people out in those areas - good solid Victorians, from all walks of life,” he told Guardian Australia.

Smith said under his leadership, the party would develop policies that would appeal to religious communities including Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus, who he said felt their “faith values are under some degree of attack from the government”.

He also confirmed upper house MP Renee Heath would sit in the [Liberal party](#) room if he was leader.

During the election campaign, Guy said [she would be excluded after claims were made that she was a lifelong member of the City Builders church](#), and that it had been directed by its global leader to infiltrate the Coalition. The church, which is led by Heath’s parents, is opposed to gay, transgender and reproductive rights. Heath has denied having the same views as her parents.

Smith said he would also revisit the party’s climate policies, citing cost of living pressures on households

“While these inner-city electorates do have a focus on this really important issue, there’s a lot of people out in the ‘burbs where cost of living is more important,” Smith said.

Smith denied the party would be abandoning inner-city seats, suggesting it had “struck balance in terms of centrist policies” and pointed to the likelihood that the Liberals will fend off teal independent challengers as proof.

While he said the party needed to do more to attract millennial voters, he denied that it had a problem appealing to women.

Pesutto - who was on Monday holding a 480-vote lead over [teal independent](#) Melissa Lowe in Hawthorn - also intends to nominate for the leadership should he win the seat.

The former shadow attorney-general, who [lost the seat in the 2018](#) “Danslide”, said the party had “no choice” but to appeal to all Victorians if it wanted to form government.

“We are a party of government and our aim and aspiration should be to connect with as many people right across the state of Victoria as we can. That includes people of faith, the inner city, the regions and rural areas,” Pesutto said.

“The Andrews government has been able to do it - it’s enjoyed success at three elections - and the number of seats it holds suggests it’s entirely possible to connect

widely across the community.”

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Former federal Liberal MP Tim Wilson has also rejected the notion the party should be focusing on certain parts of the state. He said getting more millennials - who will soon outnumber baby boomers on the electoral roll - into homeownership would help increase the party's constituency.

“There is no single political constituency to become electorally successful. We often break up different groups of people in our society and say that they want different things and this is not the case,” Wilson said.

On Twitter, former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull suggested the Victorian Liberal party “has been taken over by the hard right” and therefore struggled to garner broad support in “the most small ‘l’ liberal state in Australia”.

The Polwarth MP, Richard Riordan, as well as the Berwick MP, Brad Battin, have both said they will also run for the leadership.

Upper house MP Matthew Bach, the shadow transport infrastructure minister, is also a contender, though he could be hampered by the Liberal party's constitution, which states its leader must be a member of the lower house.

However, the possibility of Bach leading from the upper house is being openly canvassed among senior party figures.

With seven lower house seats too close to call, a vote is not expected to occur until next week. It is likely the parliament will sit the following week.

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