

Updated Politics Victoria [Victorian election](#)

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Liberal leadership hopefuls walk away from Guy's promise to bar Renee Heath



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KEY POINTS

- John Pesutto, Brad Battin, Ryan Smith and Richard Riordan have all confirmed they would nominate to lead the state Liberal Party when a ballot is held next month
- Liberal MP Matt Bach is also being encouraged to run for a leadership position, potentially challenging David Davis as the Liberal leader in the upper house.
- John Pesutto, the leading moderate candidate for the Liberal leadership, in Hawthorn is just 480 votes ahead of teal independent Melissa Lowe.
- In Mornington, former federal Liberal MP Chris Crewther is just 177 votes ahead of independent Kate Lardner.

All four of the candidates who have so far put up their hand to be the next Liberal Party leader say they would reverse Matthew Guy's party room ban on Renee Heath, an ultra-conservative church member and newly elected upper house MP.

The contest to be the next leader of the opposition widened on Monday with four men – John Pesutto, Brad Battin, Ryan Smith and Richard Riordan – all confirming to *The Age* that they would nominate for the top job when a ballot is held next month.



John Pesutto is hoping to win the marginal seat of Hawthorn. SCOTT MCNAUGHTON

They all said that Heath, who is a lifelong member of the ultra-conservative City Builders' church, would be allowed into the party room.

[Guy – who resigned as party leader on Sunday after the Coalition's election defeat – made the decision to exclude her](#) after *The Age* published [a story exposing fresh evidence](#) of disturbing conduct within the City Builders church. The church is opposed to gay, transgender and reproductive rights.

Several backbench MPs, speaking to *The Age* on the condition of anonymity, said they would push any leadership contenders to consider allowing Heath to join the party room and vote for the new leader, once the upper house result is declared, which is not expected for at least another week.

Polwarth MP Riordan said the idea that the Liberal Party was beholden to right-wing groups was a "load of nonsense" and said he would judge Heath on her actions in the party room.

Smith, a former finance minister, took a similar tack, saying he would invite Heath back into the party room and "judge her on how she performed".

"The character assassination of Renee had been abhorrent," Smith said.

Battin, the MP for Berwick, said the Liberal Party was a broad church, and he was a great believer in freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

Pesutto – who is still waiting to see if he has won back the seat of Hawthorn – was more equivocal than his colleagues but said Heath "deserves a chance to put her case to the party room". When asked to clarify by *The Age* he did not elaborate on his answer.

“My commitment is to a Liberal Party that is inclusive and tolerant of diversity, and I’m confident that this commitment is shared by all,” he said.

Heath has said that she opposed gay conversion therapy and “always believed in the separation of church and state”.

“I have never attempted to impose my religious views on others in the Liberal Party and I do not intend to do so now,” she said in a statement before the election.

With at least seven lower house seats too close to call, the ballot for the Liberals’ next leadership team is not expected to be held until next week at the earliest, with the party still hopeful it can pick up the seats of Mornington, Pakenham and Bass.

Several Liberal MPs confirmed rural MP Roma Britnell and incoming Kew MP Jess Wilson are being encouraged to run for the job of deputy leader.

On Monday, Labor was edging closer to the 55 seats it held in the last parliament with the party confident of winning Hastings and Preston, despite a statewide swing of 3.5 per cent to the Coalition on a two-party preferred measure.

At a construction site for the Suburban Rail Loop in Clayton on Monday morning, Deputy Premier Jacinta Allan refused to be drawn on the upper house results, which do not look as promising for Labor as the lower house count. But she said the Andrews government had a track record of working across party lines to deliver its legislative agenda.

She said the rail loop had been “on the ballot” at election.

“The Suburban Rail Loop was a project front and centre of the election campaign, and Victorians very clearly, once again, endorsed the Suburban Rail Loop project as the project that our growing city and state needs,” she said.

With almost every Labor minister guaranteed to remain in Parliament, the Andrews government ministry is expected to remain mostly unchanged with only one spot – that of former frontbencher Jaala Pulford – vacant.

Pulford, from Labor’s right faction, announced her resignation a month before the election. She held the portfolios of employment, small business, resources and innovation, medical research, and the digital economy.

While the Upper House result won’t be known for a while, Water and Equality Minister Harriet Shing is at risk of losing her position in Eastern Victoria to a candidate from the Legalise Cannabis Party, potentially creating another frontbench vacancy.

Several Labor ministers told *The Age* that, while they expected the frontbench to remain similar in the next Parliament, any reshuffle would probably see Planning Minister Lizzie



ILLUSTRATION: MATT GOLDING

Blandthorn moved to a new portfolio due to a perceived conflict with her brother's position at Labor-linked lobbying firm Hawker Britton.

In Hawthorn, Pesutto, who is the leading moderate candidate for the Liberal leadership, is 480 votes ahead of independent Melissa Lowe who was backed by Simon Holmes a Court's Climate 200 group.

Pesutto confirmed he would nominate to be the party's next leader if he wins the inner-eastern Melbourne seat, telling *The Age*, Liberal MPs were "receptive" of his candidacy, but that he was "respectful of the process".

Battin, who unsuccessfully challenged Micheal O'Brien for the leadership in 2021, said the election had "highlighted the need for a new start" and believed the party should focus its efforts on new "growth corridors" and engaging with multicultural groups.

Riordan said the Liberal Party had a good message to sell, but wanted MPs to get out in their communities and sell the party's values and positions. "We have gone through a couple of bushfires and we have a chance to build completely fresh," he said.



Deputy Premier Jacinta Allan visits the Suburban Rail Loop project in Clayton on Monday with Labor MPs Steve Dimopoulos (left) and John Mullahy. EDDIE JIM

Upper house Liberal MP Matt Bach is also being encouraged to run for a leadership position, potentially challenging David Davis as the Liberal leader in the upper house.

But to run for the party's leadership position, Bach would need to win a lower house seat to be eligible.

The Liberals remain in a fight for the seat of Mornington, where former federal MP Chris Crewther is just 177 votes ahead of independent Kate Lardner following a 5 per cent swing against the Liberals on a two-party-preferred measure.

In the seat of Northcote, Labor MP Kat Theophanous has a lead of 865 votes over the Greens. In the party's former stronghold of Preston in Melbourne's north, Labor candidate Nathan Lambert has endured a 15 per cent swing against him and was fighting a challenge from independent Gaetano Greco, who has leapfrogged the Greens.

Lambert, a former Labor assistant national secretary, remains ahead, but on Sunday night, he said the seat would remain uncertain until all postal votes were received and the distribution of preferences was finalised.

Labor and the Liberals remain neck-and-neck in Hastings, where Labor candidate and local councillor Paul Mercurio, best known for his role in Baz Luhrmann's classic *Strictly Ballroom*, is 470 votes ahead of Liberal Briony Hutton.

In Pakenham, Labor's Emma Vulin leads by just eight votes over Liberal David Farrelly, and in Bass, Jordan Crugnale leads by 225 votes over Liberal Aaron Brown.

In Mulgrave, where Premier Daniel Andrews comfortably retained his seat, the Victorian Electoral Commission has confirmed it will not conduct a recount despite calls from independent Ian Cook to do so with him as the second candidate. The recount would not change the result.

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