

Interview with Pesutto on Joy 94.9 before 2022 Election

- This is an interview with Pesutto on 19 November 2022.
- <https://joy.org.au/saturdaymagazine/2022/11/saturday-magazine-19-november-2022-candidate-interview-john-pesutto-liberal-hawthorn/>
- This interview features discussion of Renee Heath.

NEVENA: You're on Saturday Magazine with Nevena, Macca, and Ben. We're putting the spotlight on the seat of Hawthorn. We just heard from Nick Savage in the Greens, and next up we have John Pesutto, candidate for the Liberal Party. Welcome John.

PESUTTO: G'day, Nevena, how are you?

NEVENA: Very well.

PESUTTO: And to Macca and Ben.

MACCA: Nice to have you back on air, John. I know I think I said previously, John had been a guest on the program pretty much every month, thereabouts, for the last three-and-a-half years when he wasn't a candidate. And when John indicated he was going to stand for preselection, we didn't think it was appropriate to have him on air, but it's great to have you back today as the Liberal candidate for Hawthorn, John. And just so you know how we do this. Each of us will ask a question and we ask that you try and keep your responses to thirty seconds, and at the end of our questions, we'll give you thirty seconds or so to respond. So, I might ask the first question, actually.

NEVENA: Go ahead, Macca.

MACCA: So, John, how would you rate the performance of our State Parliament?

PESUTTO: Look, like any parliament, Macca, it can get a bit scrappy at times, and I can understand why people who look at Parliament, not only in Victoria but around the country and indeed around the world, look at it sometimes with some level of disquiet. I get it. But, you know, for the most part, it's important to remember, that as passionate as the exchanges might become, that a lot of what happens in our Parliament is done with multi-partisan or bipartisan support. So, I don't look at the state of debate in our Parliament, necessarily, and leap to despair. But, it can always and should always be improved, and if I'm elected, I do want to try and help temper political debate generally, because I think ... I've gone over the thirty seconds ... I do want to help temper debate, and I think things like social media have fired it up to the point that we need people who can go into Parliament, bring people together, and temper the important discussions that we have to have.

MACCA: Thank you.

BEN: John, good representation, I think, requires really solid engagement. How do you plan on engaging with LGBTQIA+ communities?

PESUTTO: Well, if I'm elected and I'm no longer just a candidate, I would love to be able to come back on a regular spot, if I could, Macca. I don't know if that's beyond the

pale for you, but I would certainly do that. But look, Ben, it's really important to continue the engagement I think we've made a couple of announcements, which I think were made with you ... with Macca and co around supporting legal supports, you know, I think it was a million dollars over four years for the station. But also, you know, regular engagement with the community. Now, I'm totally committed to that, and it's one of the reasons why, as Macca pointed out, why I was keen to maintain for as long as I could that regular appearance on the show, as a solid demonstration. And bear in mind that was well before I even knew whether I'd ever have a chance to put my hand up again. So, very committed to maintaining and building on those relationships.

MACCA: You might remember, John. Tass and I threatened, well, I threatened to join your Liberal Party branch and try and get you re-selected, and the look on your face of me being a member of a political party was quite an interesting expression, if I recall.

PESUTTO: You are a force of nature, so I don't think any political party could contain you, Macca. And joining a party ... I didn't say it at the time, but the worst thing you could do, is join any party. You need to be a free spirit, that's Macca.

MACCA: Thank you.

NEVENA: Well, if you could see his shirt, John, you would agree he very much is. Now, John—

PESUTTO: A Hawaiian shirt?

NEVENA: Yes, it is. How did you know?

John, do you think that LGBTQIA+ people should be able to be discriminated against in jobs that have nothing to do with our gender or sexuality? For example, should a school be able to fire or not hire a gay gardener?

PESUTTO: I don't believe a school should be able to do that. There's, you know, there's a principle in our law and it's a principle I support, that it should only be ... it should only be possible to do that when it's actually inherently required, and outside of the law, the gay gardener example, there should be no lawful basis for dismissing anybody, or not hiring anybody for that reason. And I don't ... it would be my hope that no one really wants to do that in 2022. You know, that is just completely irrelevant to employment situations and I spent a lot of time working in this jurisdiction, so I certainly do want to see those protections maintained.

BEN: John, tell me, this is a fairly tricky question. Good allies I think it's fair to say call out people who cause our communities further hurt and damage. Your party has pre-selected people who have openly homophobic and transphobic views. Are you prepared to call out that kind of behaviour?

PESUTTO: Yes, I am, Ben. And the party has taken steps this morning to indicate, for example, in the case of Renee Heath, that she will not be sitting in the Liberal Party

room should she be elected. And it's pretty certain that she will, because she occupies the number one spot. So, you know, going into the Parliament, I would very much be calling out that sort of behaviour when it appears. As I said, the party's taken strong action this morning. It's taken action in other situations where views that have been expressed have been beyond the pale and not acceptable and it's taken action on that as well. So, I am prepared to do that.

BEN: Will you be prepared to call that out publicly in Parliament, for example, or in front of the media? Or are you referring to, you know, behind the scenes, quiet conversations?

PESUTTO: Well, it would be, it would be all of the above potentially. And what I'll say, Ben, is when you're in a large organisation, if the organisation has a leadership, like to take the example of today, that going to move on something and very quickly take action, then I'm happy with that. What Matthew Guy announced this morning with respect to Renee Heath was an appropriate course. So, I wouldn't necessarily feel the need to go out and add to that if he's already taken action. If action's not taken, or not taken promptly, then absolutely I'd be prepared to come out and call out that behaviour.

MACCA: Can I just follow up on that, John. So, Renee was endorsed as a Liberal candidate. And you might recall in the past, who I used to refer to as Comrade Kroger, often came on the show and expressed ... you know, when I asked him about the views of some candidates, and he said, you know, that it's very difficult to check the history of candidates, but that was an ongoing work. So, she was a Liberal candidate, she's on the ballot as a Liberal candidate, you're now ... you know, your leader has said she won't be sitting in the party room. So, you want people to elect her as a Liberal, but she's not going to break bread with you?

PESUTTO: Well, we're, what is it, we're eight days out, seven days out, from the election. You can't change what's on the ballot, as people are voting as we speak. But look, Michael's point is well made in the sense that no party can be across every detail if a candidate doesn't disclose something. So, we've tried in recent years to institute procedures where there's a review process, and you go through a sort of a number of steps where you're supposed to disclose matters that might be relevant to the election or relevant to your own nomination. And the party is trying, and for the most part it's working better than it was. There's no doubt it's working better. Can it be better? Yeah, absolutely. But you can't always pick everything up, because you are to some extent dependent on what's disclosed in the form. But the party is taking steps in good faith to try and, you know, make sure that when people come forward for preselection everything that's relevant is known. But to some extent, you're not always going to be able to achieve that to the point you like, because you're dependent on what's disclosed.

MACCA: Ok.

NEVENA: John, what have been your reflections on the media landscape this time around, as opposed to 2018?

PESUTTO: Well, that's a tough one, Nevena, in the sense that there's, you know, there's multi-media now, and you know, social media's one aspect of it, there's mainstream, which is sort of feeding in and off what's going on on social media, so it's a much more disparate landscape. And, you know, it's more febrile than I've ever seen it before, but that's not saying anything remarkable in the sense that it's just a reflection that there are different sources of media with different levels of trustworthiness I suppose. But you know, it does make it harder, when you're a candidate or even a political party trying to impart your messages across the community, definitely.

BEN: John, you voted to repeal reforms to the Equal Opportunities Act back in 2011, and your party voted against those changes this year. Would you do that again if you were elected?

PESUTTO: Well, I think this bill ... these changes that went through have sort of now been debated for several years and I'm of the view now that it's becoming reasonably settled law. So, I certainly, if I'm elected will be reluctant to revisit any provisions that have been discussed and debated over the last, say ten years, or so. Because I think you get to a point with legislative reform and changes where a debate may well be legitimate and you have that debate out, but once it's sort of settled, you've got to give the community certainty about what that law is. So, for me, the question Nevena asked before, that's very much for me becoming increasingly settled, and I think it's more in keeping with the community's view that somebody who is able to perform the inherent requirements of the job should not be treated unfavourably because of a protected attribute. So, you know, I'm reluctant to revisit laws when they've been debated at length and there's been long discussion about them.

MACCA: John, Liberal ... official Liberal party preferences in lower house seats, with some exceptions, are going to the Greens. How do you feel about that? That's a bit of a surprise I would have thought.

PESUTTO: Well, look I, yeah ... you know, I've been a long fan of putting the Greens last, but I do understand the party's position here, and we're saying to the community that, look, this election for us needs to be, you know, a real decision point on how the Andrews Labor Government has performed across a range of areas. And we've taken the view as a party that that's what the election needs to be about, and that's what we're trying to make it about. That referendum, if you like, on how well they've done that. So, to do that, you do have to be prepared to say well, if you want a change, you know, you've got to put Labor last and vote for your Liberal candidate. There can be debates, as there always are, about whether that preference is the right way to go or not. I certainly support it, given the strategy that's behind it, even though for a long time we put the Greens last.

MACCA: Now, John, this won't surprise you. I'm going to quote some of your words back to you. You've spoken in some interviews about nuance, how important nuance is.

PESUTTO: Yep.

MACCA: Can I ask you to give me some nuance on some of the positions you've taken on LGBTQI issues and your voting record and your party's stated policy, particularly during this campaign. Give me some nuance.

PESUTTO: In what sense? Do you want me ... is there a particular issue?

MACCA: Well—

PESUTTO: [unintelligible]

MACCA: The Equal Opportunity Act, in terms of how that applies in institutions. You know, changes to the Equal Opportunity Act. I see there's a bit of a gap.

PESUTTO: No, no. I think I know where you're going. Look, I'm trying to think of an example. So, one example might be, for a long time, the party's position ... this is what I was alluding to before ... so, for a long time, the party's position was that the way we, if you like, mediate between competing rights in the Equal Opportunity Act, say between a ... the right to religious freedom, which is a protected attribute, and equality before the law, which protects all of us, including on the basis of our sexual orientation, right. The Act tries to mediate that and there have been over the years different types of tests that have been applied. So, if you look at the position the party took in 2010, with that that should be a broader exercise than the inherent [unintelligible] requirement test, which is the law now. What I was saying to you before, and in terms of nuance, was that we're all trying to mediate that in a way which protects all rights. Now, I think, where we've landed now is that for a long time, inherent requirement has been the test. I think, as I was saying in response to Nevena's question before, that, you know, that's becoming an increasingly settled view. It's certainly where I'm landing, which is unless there's a really good reason why somebody's protected attribute, whatever it might be, it might be sexual orientation, it might be religious observance, or it might be political opinion or industrial activity, whatever the protected attribute under the Act, that unless that's got something inherently connected to the performance of the task, then that for me is becoming increasingly settled law. But what I'm saying is, you know, that's been a process over time and when you talk about nuance, what, I guess, what ... and I think I know where that's coming from is you are dealing with an Act, which is trying as best it can to mediate between those competing rights. So, there's always going to be a challenge, even with the inherent requirements test, there's always going to be a challenge. But I'm of the view now that that is a narrow test which is increasingly becoming settled law.

MACCA: Ok, you've got thirty seconds, John, to tell the electors of Hawthorn why they should vote for you. But before I do, if you do win the seat of Hawthorn, and you are in government, or whether you're in opposition, yes, you can come back.

PESUTTO: It's good to know. I miss you guys. Look, ok, thirty seconds, I'm a progressive modern liberal who believes in solutions and believes in opportunity, that we're free to be whoever we want to be, whoever we want to love, whoever ... whatever identity we want to adopt. I am an inclusive liberal, I'm obviously ... area in terms of local ... my local pitch for the people in Hawthorn, you won't find anybody who is more connected to this community, who's got clearer ideas for what this particular community needs, and knows how to get it done. And I've had a lot of time, Macca, you and Tass were with me, that four year journey, and for all of you, Fiona as well. You saw me evolve over the last four years, and I've had a lot of time to reflect on what I could do if I can get back, and I just thank you guys for giving me a chance, this morning, to put my views out and if I am elected, I really look forward to coming back.

MACCA: Great. John, thank you for making the time. I know it's difficult, particularly the last Saturday of pre-polling. We wish all the candidates well. Thanks for your time.

MACCA: And I hope you have a good day, mate.

PESUTTO: Alrighty, thanks guys.

MACCA: Cheers.

NEVENA: Thanks, John.

MACCA: You are on Saturday Magazine, Joy 94.9 with Macca, Nevena, and Ben. Stay with us.