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John Pesutto set to pursue ‘truth’ defence against Moira Deeming

EXCLUSIVE

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Lawyers for embattled [Victorian Opposition Leader John Pesutto](#) will argue [his claims](#) Moira Deeming associated with Nazi sympathisers at a women’s rights rally are “substantially true”, as he prepares to defend himself against a defamation suit from [the expelled MP](#).

A “see you in court” legal letter, exclusively obtained by The Australian, sets the pair up for a costly, public and likely very messy showdown in the Federal Court later this year, as [questions persist over how Mr Pesutto will pay his legal bills](#).

[Mrs Deeming](#) has issued [Mr Pesutto](#) with [two defamation concerns notices](#) since first indicating last month she would pursue legal action, alleging the Liberal leader accused her of being a “Nazi sympathiser and Nazi associate”, and used that as a basis to [“threaten and bully” her out of the state party room](#).

The dispute between the pair dates back to Mrs Deeming’s appearance at a March [“Let Women Speak” rally](#) that was gatecrashed by neo-Nazis.

The protest was organised by [British feminist activist Kellie-Jay Keen](#)’s group, Standing for Women UK, which campaigns against what supporters see as the

[infringement of transgender rights upon those of women and children.](#)

Transgender rights activists held a counter-protest, and a third group, of masked men dressed in black, taunted the transgender protesters and [performed the Nazi salute on the steps of state parliament.](#)

Mr Pesutto [initially attempted to expel Mrs Deeming in March](#), but was forced to resort to suspending her for nine months amid a lack of support from colleagues.

In seeking to make the case against Mrs Deeming, Mr Pesutto circulated a [15-page dossier of social media screenshots and media reports](#) – mostly relating to Ms Keen – accusing the MP of “organising, promoting and participating in a rally with speakers and other organisers who themselves have been publicly associated with far right-wing extremist groups including neo-Nazi activists”.

Mr Pesutto’s legal letter indicates the Liberal leader stands by this dossier and his original expulsion motion, which will be key to his “truth” defence.

“For the reasons outlined in this letter, we consider that your client’s foreshadowed claim is bound to fail,” wrote Mr Pesutto’s legal team, which includes Minter Ellison partner and veteran media lawyer Peter Bartlett, who has been engaged alongside Matt Collins KC.

“In the event that your client commences proceedings, Mr Pesutto intends to vigorously defend the claim, including on the basis that the meanings in fact conveyed by the motion are substantially true.

“We are instructed to make clear that our client makes no apologies for taking a strong stance against your client’s failure to dissociate herself unequivocally from and to condemn individuals with known links to neo-Nazis.

“He considers that there is no place in the Victorian parliament or the parliamentary Liberal Party for such persons, and that Mrs Deeming, by the conduct alleged in the motion, brought discredit upon the parliament and the parliamentary party.”

Mrs Deeming said Mr Pesutto had rejected her “months of pursuing private and internal avenues of mediation in order to get justice”.

“It appears from his letter that Mr Pesutto prefers for us to settle this dispute in court. It saddens me that a court case will inevitably cause the issue to drag on in the media – but as I have said from the very beginning, my number one priority is clearing my family name for the sake of my children,” she said.

The Australian understands Mrs Deeming intends to file the case after the [Warranty by-election](#) – due to be held in August or September – so as not to be accused of damaging the Liberal Party’s prospects in the seat it holds with a 4.2 per cent margin.

She has engaged [leading defamation lawyer Patrick George](#) and [high-profile barrister Sue Chrysanthou to act](#) on her behalf.

Mr Pesutto’s office declined to comment on the letter, or answer questions about how he plans to fund his legal defence.

Earlier this month, the Liberal leader said he was “still working on” funding sources, amid significant internal opposition to party members being asked to foot a bill which could surpass \$1 million.

“There’ll be options, but I will announce how that’s to be done in the coming weeks. It will be soon. I will be transparent about that,” he said.

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Rachel Baxendale writes on state and federal politics from The Australian’s Melbourne and Victorian press gallery bureaux. During her time working for the paper in the Canberra press gallery she covered the 2016 fe... [Read more](#)



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