

Feds to Libs: start Battin, quit fighting

TEAM DUTTON DRIVES STATE LEADER CHANGE

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Victorian Liberals have surrendered to pre-election pressure from federal MPs and installed new state leader Brad Battin, who immediately promised lower taxes, a greater focus on cost-of-living issues and resources being poured into conservative growth areas in Melbourne's outer suburbs.

Mr Battin will talk to Peter Dutton about his priorities for the state party after federal MPs helped clear the way for the ex-policeman to take over the leadership after months of internal brawling.

Federal frontbencher Michael Sukkar played a key role in the elevation of Mr Battin after dethroned leader John Pesutto suffered a heavy defamation loss in the Federal Court against Liberal colleague Moira Deeming.

Mr Battin and the federal Opposition Leader are both former police officers and have a shared focus on outer-suburban and growth-corridor voters, and have a similar approach to law-and-order issues.

Mrs Deeming said Mr Pesutto apologised to her on Friday and shook her hand following her re-entry into the party room, which came during three key votes, culminating in Mr Battin winning the leadership against former federal MP Chris Crewther, by 21 votes to seven.

In his first comments, Mr Battin, 49, stressed the need for unity in the bitterly divided Victorian Liberal Party, vowing to talk closely with colleagues and to fully debate internal issues before major decisions were made.

His first key pledges include to cut the size of the public service, lower taxes, provide more on the beat police and focus on outer suburban voters.

"We need a stronger budget, we need to ensure that we're reducing taxes," he said.

"It'll be our goal to have reduced taxes to release pressure on business across the state."

A need to force unity among state MPs was central to Friday's leadership spill, with Mr Dutton and other senior colleagues anxious about the impact

of the infighting on the Coalition's chances at the federal election, which is due by late May.

There are several Labor seats in Victoria that could fall amid the trashing of the ALP brand following – and during – the Covid pandemic.

Mr Battin said he would meet Mr Dutton soon to discuss the political and policy landscape, with the emphasis on what was best for Victoria. “We can work through that and have those discussions,” the new leader said.

Mr Pesutto, who faces a potentially crippling defamation payout over his spat with Mrs Deeming, did not contest the leadership ballot.

Mr Battin, who is pro-natural gas, said any specific changes to taxes would be decided after consultation with colleagues, adding that cost of living was at the heart of his political strategy.

“It’ll be our goal to have reduced taxes to release pressure on business across the state,” he said. “It’ll be our goal to ensure that we can reduce the cost of items people are buying at the supermarket in the future by reducing the tax burden.

“It will be our goal to ensure we reduce taxes on our property market so that we can build the houses we need so every person who wants a home can get a home.”

Mr Battin said the opposition would also focus on policies to reduce the cost of energy and to invest in roads to enable growth in regional towns,

“We want gas here in Victoria, it is vital,” Mr Battin said.

There have been long-running discussions in Canberra about Mr Pesutto's leadership, with concerns that the spat with Mrs Deeming could continue into 2025 and harm Mr Dutton's attempts to win office.

Mr Pesutto said: “We're all behind Brad now and we're focused on election in 2026.”

Mrs Deeming re-entered the parliamentary party room after an enforced exile over her attendance at a women's rights rally last year that was gatecrashed by neo-Nazis. This triggered a series of events that led to her suing Mr Pesutto for defamation, winning \$300,000 and costs that could rise to millions of dollars.

“We didn't need that unexploded bomb ruining our chances at the election,” a federal MP said.

Mrs Deeming's return to the Liberal Party room after a lengthy break was one of the key sticking points over Mr Pesutto's leadership, having a week earlier used his casting vote to prevent her coming back to sit with her colleagues.

A strong majority of MPs backed her return on Friday after splitting 14-14 in a vote the previous week.

Mrs Deeming said she thought Mr Pesutto had come into the position of leader with “lots of potential and good will,” and didn’t know what had happened in the background. “He has apologised to me today and that’s the end of it,” she said.

“The only thing left is to officially retract the defamatory documents and then we’re done.

“I am very sad for John and what’s happened in his life, as much as I am very upset about the whole thing and for myself and for my children.”

Mr Battin worked as a Victoria Police officer from 2001 to 2007 and ran a bakery from 2007 until his election in 2010.

Friday marked the third time he had attempted to win the leadership.

He had wanted to secure the job uncontested but faced a challenge from former federal treasurer Josh Frydenberg’s then staffer Jess Wilson, who was knocked out in the first round of voting.

Sources said Ms Wilson had been offered the deputy leadership but she had opted against this, leaving that role to be picked up by former tennis player Sam Groth.

There is inevitable angst among some state MPs, who believe Mr Pesutto has been treated poorly and that the conservative wing of the party has taken a winner-takes-all approach.

“It’s a coalition of convenience rather than a coalition of conviction,” one MP said.

Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan said she was focused on supporting emergency services and communities affected by the bushfires, rather than division within the Liberal Party room.

“We’re two days after Christmas and we see the Liberal Party focused on their disunity and lack of trust in each other – that’s for them,” she told 3AW.

“I’m focused on our Victorians who are under fire threat and supporting our emergency services.

“I cannot emphasise enough how what is going on in the Liberal Party party room, two days after Christmas while parts of the state are under fire risk, is very much a matter for them.”