

# THE AUSTRALIAN

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## Lily D'Ambrosio's Labor Party branch forged signatures of dead men

### EXCLUSIVE

By **RACHEL BAXENDALE**

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Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews has continued to stand by key frontbencher Lily D'Ambrosio and says revelations about a state branch associated with her are matters for the state party, not for him.

The Australian revealed today that only 13 of 132 members of the Lalor South branch continued to be registered following the party's branch-stacking investigation. Furthermore, at least two people had their signatures forged for their membership to be renewed after their death.

"I would not draw any comparison whatsoever between what you've put to me in relation to Lily," Mr Andrews said in response to questions at a press conference.

"Go back and read the resignation statements of those who resigned and the statement in relation to the one minister who was in fact removed and I don't think there can be any comparison drawn."

Mr Andrews was referring to the original scandal in 2020 that led to his referral of the matter to the IBAC, and led to the internal investigation.

"These are matters for the state secretary and as for any integrity agency, they do not need to be referred matters and, in fact, unbeknownst to us at the time, that

integrity agency was, in fact, investigating these matters at the time that it was referred,” he said.

“We had an intervention in this state. We’ve had a comprehensive process of reform. We are a stronger party because of that.

“We are a better party because of that and what’s more, when it comes to the integrity of Lily D’Ambrosio ... I don’t think I’ve ever met anybody more focused on their duties than her. She’s a person of character and integrity.”

## **Labor Party branch forged signatures of dead men**

Leaked details circulated during [Victorian Labor’s 2020 branch-stacking investigation](#) show that less than 10 per cent – or 13 of 132 – members signed up to Climate Action, [Energy and Resources Minister Lily D’Ambrosio’s](#) Lalor South branch continued to be registered following the probe, which was conducted by [former premier Steve Bracks and former federal deputy Labor leader Jenny Macklin](#).

The children of two men whose memberships of the branch were renewed for two years after their deaths have expressed their shock and disappointment at learning of the conduct.

“I’m shocked. I wasn’t aware of him being a member of the Labor Party,” said Tom Donato, whose father, Antonio, died in 2017.

No other Victorian ALP branch lost more members in the Bracks-Macklin clean-out, which was commissioned by Mr Andrews following revelations in 2020 of [“industrial scale” branch-stacking](#) being conducted by the [Premier’s factional enemy Adem Somyurek](#).

Mr Somyurek was expelled from the Labor Party, and the scandal ultimately [ended the parliamentary careers of all of his prominent allies](#), including former ministers [Marlene Kairouz](#), [Luke Donnellan](#) and [Robin Scott](#).

But despite records given to The Australian, which show Ms D’Ambrosio’s ALP branch was the only one in Victoria where 100 per cent of membership fees were paid by non-traceable means – in other words in cash – no public scrutiny has been brought to bear on allegations of branch-stacking within the [Socialist Left faction](#),

to which both the minister and the Premier belong. A [2021 joint IBAC and - Ombudsman investigation](#), known as Operation Watts, focused exclusively on allegations concerning Mr Somyurek's Mods faction.

In response to more than 1000 words of questions from The Australian about the alleged conduct of Ms D'Ambrosio's ALP branch, Mr Andrews on Monday praised her as an "outstanding member" of his team.

"Memberships are a matter for the party," the Premier said. "The government supports every recommendation from IBAC's Operation Watts report and is working to deliver all of them."

Mr Andrews did not directly address any of the detailed allegations made against Ms D'Ambrosio, her ALP branch or her staff.

The minister said it was the first time these matters had been raised with her and that she expected her staff to follow the law and the rules of the ALP. The leaked Labor records reveal that 113, or 86 per cent, of the 132 members of Ms D'Ambrosio's branch, based in Melbourne's northern suburbs, were paying the minimum fee of \$35 a year, on the basis that they held concession cards.

Many of them were elderly members of the local Italian community, including Antonio Donato, who died in July 2017 aged 82, and Celestino Nigro, who died in September 2017 aged 77.

Obituaries were published for both Italian-born men in Italian community newspaper Il Globo.

Despite their deaths, Donato and Nigro's memberships were twice renewed posthumously, in May 2018 and May 2019, giving them continuity of membership until May 2020.

Membership forms are required to be signed by members, meaning signatures for both Donato and Nigro were forged when their forms were submitted, although it is not clear exactly who forged the signatures.

Membership fees for both men were paid in cash, according to membership lists from as late as April 2020 for Nigro, and July 2019 for Donato.

Contacted by The Australian on Monday, Nigro's daughter, Mary, said she was "disappointed that they'd use a dead person like that to get political power".

"I cannot believe that the Labor Party would go to the extent of forging my deceased father's name to use that for their party benefit. If they are capable of doing this, what else are they capable of? I'm very disappointed in their conduct. They should just let the deceased rest in peace," she said. Ms Nigro said she was aware that both her father and mother were ALP members "when he was alive".

Donato's son, Tom, said he was "shocked" to learn his father was even an ALP member, let alone that his membership was being renewed beyond the grave.

"I'm shocked. I wasn't aware of him being a member of the Labor Party. He wasn't that way inclined. He wasn't an Australian citizen, so he couldn't vote," Mr Donato said.

He said he was aware Ms D'Ambrosio would often speak at the Italian club with which his parents had been involved.

Ms D'Ambrosio said: "Some of my electorate office staff are involved in local ALP branch activities, and it is my expectation that when they do so they always comply with the rules of the party and the terms of their employment contract. This is the first time this matter has been raised with me.

"There were no allegations, and no findings against me in the Bracks and Macklin review.

"I support the work of Steve Bracks and Jenny Macklin in reforming and modernising the Victorian ALP, which has left us with a stronger party. I'm a proud life member of the ALP and I have always sought to act with honesty and integrity in my work as a member of parliament."

Party documents circulated in 2020 show bulk membership renewals were submitted by Lidia Argondizzo, who was then and remains an electorate officer in Ms D'Ambrosio's Mill Park office, and previously served as a state MP from 2002 to 2006.

The documents show Ms Argondizzo used a cheque drawn from a bank account belonging to the ALP to make the payment to the party on behalf of the members

whose memberships had been paid in cash, in a matter that is similar to the kind of branchstacking that ended the Labor Party careers of Mr Somyurek and his allies. However, Ms Argondizzo vehemently denies she engaged in branch stacking.

In response to questions about her conduct, Ms Argondizzo said: "When it comes to matters related to the ALP, I believe I have always acted in accordance with the party rules and the law.

"I have no knowledge regarding the membership renewals of those two specific individuals and I categorically deny any wrongdoing in relation to them."

The documents also show that as recently as July 2019, Ms D'Ambrosio's branch was meeting in her electorate office during business hours, at 10.30am on the third Friday of every month.

The meetings, and Ms Argondizzo's role in lodging bulk memberships, came long after an [Ombudsman's investigation into Labor's "Red Shirts"](#) reports ahead of the 2014 state election highlighted the party's improper use of taxpayer-funded staff and resources for party political purposes.

Branch-stacking is generally deployed by political operatives to maximise their faction's influence in internal party ballots.

#### RACHEL BAXENDALE, VICTORIAN POLITICAL REPORTER

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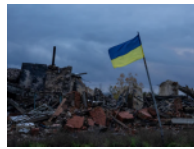
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