

The Rise of the Hard Right Candidate: A Warning from Sex Workers

– Lisa Dallimore and Matthew Roberts

Two City of Boroondara Councillors – Mormon Cynthia Watson and Christian conservative Nick Stavrou – are running for state parliament in the November election and they both present a disturbing brand of hard right politics. Each has been preselected by the Liberal Party to contest the Lower House Ringwood District and the Upper House Southern Metropolitan Region respectively on November 26.

In early September 2021 Boroondara Council voted 10 to 1 against sex work decriminalisation. The decriminalisation of sex work is recognised by Amnesty International as a human rights issue; it is also seen as a labour issue by sex worker activists, who in Victoria have been fighting for decriminalisation since the 1970s.

Later that month at another meeting, Council attempted to drown out sex workers' voices with a string of anti-sex work speakers. The writers of this article, representatives from Sex Work Law Reform Victoria, were present; one of us spoke alongside veteran sex workers' rights activist Cheryl Overs. That night we faced misinformation and fearmongering from many anti-sex work speakers who made us feel unwelcome, dismissed and stigmatised.

The Council's failure to adequately address sex work issues comprises a textbook example of how not to engage with minority communities. This is a further indication that some Councillors harbour hard right conservative views.

Although Amnesty International recognises sex workers' rights as human rights, the erosion of basic rights applies to many groups beyond sex workers. The rise and mainstreaming of far-right Trump-style politics in the USA gives us a hint of what may be coming to Australia. Voter suppression moves, the erosion of abortion and other reproductive rights, and a newly invigorated assault on LGBTIQ communities in the US are reminders that attacks on human rights now affect millions of Americans from all walks of life. We expect most voters in Melbourne's eastern suburbs would be unwilling to import the division and extremism of USA style politics.

The candidates contesting the upcoming state election have been declared and a clear trend is apparent. The Victorian Liberal Party is choosing to preselect hard right candidates across the board – not just in the eastern

suburbs. In the western suburbs, Christian fundamentalist Moira Deeming will be on the ballot while Bernie Finn has found a new home in the Democratic Labour Party after being dumped by the Liberals earlier this year for his extreme anti-abortion views.

We've recently published an election guide, rating the best and worst candidates on their sex workers' rights performance. Candidates Nick Stavrou and Cynthia Watson were rated poorly.

Victoria is generally considered to be one of the most progressive states in Australia. The biggest losers in the swing to the hard right might be the Victorian Liberal Party itself. Liberals performed badly at the last state election, so why the party continues to preselect candidates who are well outside the mainstream baffles voters and commentators alike. A vote for Liberal Party candidates Cynthia Watson or Nick Stavrou is a long way from what Liberal Party elder statesman John Howard refers to as the 'sensible centre'.

Lisa Dallimore and Matthew Roberts work with Sex Work Law Reform Victoria, a not-for-profit led by sex workers lobbying for the legal rights of sex workers in Victoria. contact@swlrv.org.au Find their election guide at www.swlrv.org.au