

## The text row in the Victorian Liberal Party explained

Farrah Tomazin December 20, 2018 — 6.41pm

The Liberal Party in Victoria suffered another blow when homophobic and racist text messages exchanged by party heavyweights Marcus Bastiaan and Paul Mitchell, were published in *The Age*. We explain what is going on.

**Who are Marcus Bastiaan and Paul Mitchell?** They are conservative power brokers who form part of the Victorian Liberal Party's organisational wing. Bastiaan in particular has been a central figure in an internal culture war that has taken place over the past three years. With Mitchell by his side, the charismatic 29-year-old has embarked on a mass "recruitment drive" of new members, which has shifted the state branch further to the Right.

Bastiaan was also the Liberals' metropolitan vice president, second-in-charge to then state president Michael Kroger. However, he stood down in September citing "family reasons". He continues to be active behind the scenes. Mitchell also remains a key member of the administrative committee as the party's country male vice-president. The young Liberal once earned the nickname "the Milkman" after posting a series of suggestive photos of himself - one of which involved a close up of his nipple.

**Who were they recruiting to the party?** Probus groups, and "anyone who will listen". Members of declining micro parties such as Family First and the Australian Christians were also brought into the Liberal fold, as were ethnic groups in targeted areas, such as Indians in Melbourne's southeast. The aim, they said, was to clear out "dead wood" MPs and rebuild the ageing Liberal party into a younger and more stridently conservative movement.

Their opponents, including most of former Opposition leader Matthew Guy's parliamentary team, viewed it as branch stacking and a grab for power.

**Why were they recruiting?** Because whoever has the numbers gains the power. At the Liberal state council in April, the Bastiaan-Mitchell forces helped re-elect Michael Kroger as state president and installed themselves and key allies to the party's powerful administrative committee, which determines preselections.

**Who are they aligned with in the party hierarchy?** Former president Michael Kroger; Federal Minister Greg Hunt; conservative Federal MPs Michael Sukkar, Alan Tudge, and Kevin Andrews (Bastiaan's wife Stephanie is listed as a staffer to Sukkar and previously ran the Menzies/Warrandyte Young Liberals in Andrews' electorate).

**What has been the effect on the party?** It's given the conservatives control of the state branch, as well as allowing the religious Right to have an unprecedented presence. At least 10 of the 78 people elected to the Liberals' administrative bodies at the party's April state council are now Mormons. The realignment of power led to a perception that the Liberals were "out of touch" with most voters, particularly in Victoria, Australia's most progressive state.

**What are these text messages about?** The text messages were sent between April 2017 and the party's state conference a year later - the same conference where Michael Kroger faced a challenge for his presidency from party moderate Greg Hannan. (Some members had initially backed former federal minister Nick Minchin for presidency but the challenge never eventuated). The texts reveal the power plays behind the scenes. For instance, it's believed that Mitchell's reference "sorting out curries tonight with Rampal" refers to how Indian voting blocks were being determined in conjunction with another party member, Rampal Muthyala.

**Why are the texts emerging now?** The conservative faction has splintered, with some senior figures once close to Bastiaan and Mitchell now seeking to distance themselves. Also, there's no shortage of internal critics who blame the pair and their allies for the drubbing that Matthew Guy and his team suffered at last month's election. Enemies new and old are seeking to hurt the powerbrokers.

<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/the-text-row-in-the-victorian-liberal-party-explained-20181220-p50njw.html>