

McCormack puts Chester back on frontbench in cautious changes

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Victorian Nationals MP Darren Chester, controversially [dropped from cabinet by Barnaby Joyce](#), has been restored to the ministry in a minimalist reshuffle by new party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack.

Chester takes McCormack's old posts of veterans' affairs and defence personnel. He also replaces McCormack as deputy leader of the house. He will be in the outer ministry rather than in cabinet, as he was previously, but is believed to be happy with the outcome.

The dropping of Chester in the December reshuffle – on the stated grounds that the election of Bridget McKenzie as deputy meant Victoria would be over-represented in the Nationals' cabinet line-up – sparked much criticism. It added to the pressure on Joyce when the news of his affair with a former staffer broke.

In other changes, Queenslander Keith Pitt, also dropped by Joyce, becomes assistant minister to the deputy prime minister.

Mark Coulton, from New South Wales, is elevated to assistant minister for trade, tourism and investment.

Two assistant minister have been relegated to the backbench – Damian Drum from Victoria and Luke Hartsuyker from NSW.

McCormack has rewarded supporters but has been cautious in making changes. Rumours were flying among some in the jittery Nationals of much wider changes though these never seemed likely, given the new leader needs to settle the party down. McCormack said in a statement that "ultimately my focus was on maintaining stability so the government can get on with the job of delivering for the nation".

On Monday, McCormack was sworn into the infrastructure and transport portfolio that Joyce

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took from Chester in December.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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