

Scott Morrison's controversial move to install former Labor party president Warren Mundine as Liberal candidate in the ultra-marginal NSW seat of Gilmore has triggered a local implosion.

As members of the Liberal state executive were voting on Tuesday to admit Mundine to their party and nominate him as the candidate, Grant Schultz, who had been selected by the locals in December, was exiting the party, as were some of his supporters.

South Coast state Liberal MP Shelley Hancock (who is Speaker in the NSW parliament) pointedly [observed](#) : "Only recently Scott Morrison was talking about the importance of grassroots processes when preselecting candidates".

Schultz, son of the sharp-tongued former MP the late Alby Schultz, [told](#) the South Coast Register that his dad would be "rolling in his grave in utter disgust and anger" at what had happened.

"He would take the same view of mine that the leadership of Scott Morrison has taken the party to the days of Eddie Obeid and the faceless men of Labor," said Schultz, who is a local real estate agent. "To turn their backs on the democratic principles of this party is quite frankly extraordinary and without precedent in this party's history."

Not quite. Late last year Craig Kelly, who helped bring Malcolm Turnbull down, was protected from his locals who wanted to deselect him. The Prime Minister feared that unless Kelly's future was guaranteed, the maverick backbencher could defect to the crossbench.

Read more: [***Turnbull versus Morrison in Liberal crisis over Craig Kelly***](#)

Morrison and senior party figures have been in negotiations with Mundine for months, and party research has tested his popularity. Gilmore is currently held by Ann Sudmalis, who last year announced she wouldn't stand again, alleging branch stacking and bullying against her.

Read more: [Morrison tells Liberal organisation to act on bullying after second woman flags she'll quit](#)

Gilmore stretches along the NSW coast from Kiama in the north to Tuross Head in the south. It takes in popular resort and retirement areas and farming land.

The government's grip on the seat is wafer-thin - [less than 1%](#) . In the present climate, it is likely to be lost to Labor whoever the Liberals put up. With this kerfuffle, and Schultz declaring he will run as an independent, their chances could simply be further diminished.

To complicate the picture, the Nationals are [considering](#) whether to enter the race, with local branch members wanting former state minister Katrina Hodgkinson to stand.

Philip Ruddock, president of the NSW party, explained the refusal to accept Schultz in a brief statement. "Mr Schultz nominated against a sitting member who later withdrew and given these circumstance the party has elected to not proceed with the endorsement. The party should be able to consider the best candidate to represent voters, their aspirations and concerns in each community."

Mundine doesn't live in the electorate, although he has family connections there. He has been quoted as saying, "I love the place. I feel most comfortable in that area, for me it's like going home."

ABC election analyst Antony Green [describes](#) Mundine as "a brave choice" (in the Humphrey

Appleby sense), pointing out that “it’s the sort of regional seat where personal vote matters.”

In 2001 Mundine ran unsuccessfully in third place on the ALP Senate ticket. Later he failed to get Labor preselection for a lower house seat.

He was ALP national president in 2006-07. But his public profile has come through his role as an Indigenous voice. He was a member of John Howard’s Indigenous advisory council, and [ch aired](#) that of Tony Abbott, a [position he lost](#) under Malcolm Turnbull. (In late November Mundine [tweeted](#) “I wish Malcolm Termite would crawl back into his little hole he come from.”)

Mundine left the ALP in 2012 and became increasingly identified with the conservative side of politics. He has also built a media presence on Sky, where he has a program “Mundine Means Business”.

As he weighed his future in recent months, Mundine has been double dating.

In 2018 he joined the Liberal Democrats, and was [being considered](#) as a potential Senate candidate for them.

Liberal Democrat senator David Leyonhjelm says he spoke to Mundine late last year about reports that the Liberals were courting him.

Mundine played down the speculation as media talk, Leyonhjelm says. But he said he had some issues with section 44 of the constitution through his business interests which needed sorting out, and he suggested leaving the discussion about the possible Senate spot until the new year.

View from The Hill: Morrison's Gilmore candidate is the man who's been everywhere

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

That's where matters lay until last week when the president of the Liberal Democrats received a letter from Mundine resigning from the party. Leyonhjelm wasn't totally surprised: he'd been watching Mundine's recent pro-Liberal tweets.

The Prime Minister will appear with Mundine in Gilmore on Wednesday. Morrison on Tuesday wouldn't be drawn on his candidacy. But he said that he'd been "a friend of Warren for some time" and described him as a "top bloke" who had "a lot to offer".

Be that as it may, this is shaping as a very inauspicious start to the campaign of someone who will carry the tag of a captain's pick candidate.

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.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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