

Imposition of right-wing candidate intensifies turmoil in Australia's ruling party

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The factional infighting tearing apart the Liberal-National Coalition, a mainstay of capitalist rule in Australia for 70 years, worsened this week when Prime Minister Scott Morrison installed indigenous businessman Warren Mundine as the Liberal Party's candidate for an electorate south of Sydney, triggering a backlash by local party members.

The anointment of Mundine, an associate of ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott, overrode the party branches' previous election of a local real estate agent. It is another indicator of a concerted drive to refashion the Liberal Party along Trump-style right-wing populist lines as a means of diverting mounting social discontent.

Morrison, who was himself installed as party leader last August via a factional operation to oust his predecessor Malcolm Turnbull, is a leading figure in the party's most right-wing faction, led by Abbott and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton.

By "parachuting" Mundine in as the party's candidate for Gilmore, on the New South Wales (NSW) south coast, Morrison and his backers have sent a message of their determination to restructure the party, even if it means a disastrous result in the imminent federal election, which must be held by mid-May.

Local Liberal Party parliamentarians and branch members reacted with outrage when the party's NSW state executive moved to overturn the preselection of Grant Schultz at Morrison's behest. Schultz announced he had quit the party and would contest the seat as an independent, personally denouncing Morrison and accusing the party of betraying democracy.

Long-serving NSW south coast state MP Shelley Hancock, the speaker of the NSW lower house, said it was "one of the darkest days of the Liberal Party" and that the prime minister's actions had ensured Labor would win the seat.

In response, Morrison only stoked the conflict. He

sought to justify his intervention by accusing Schultz of gaining preselection last year by bullying and undermining the previous female local member of parliament, a claim that Schultz vehemently denied.

In his praise for Mundine, Morrison pointed to the actual political calculations behind his nomination. "Warren has demonstrated his leadership ability over many decades, including the role he has played in reforming our welfare system," Morrison said. "He has strong values on the importance of family and working hard, on respecting each other, and has demonstrated a real 'no excuses' policy when it comes to getting things done. He will play a very significant role within our team and the direction we take in the future."

In other words, Mundine is regarded as a spearhead of a sharp political shift that will include further demonising unemployed workers and other welfare recipients, demanding "hard work" from employees and accepting "no excuses" for failing to sacrifice for the alleged good of the nation. His persona as an indigenous man who reportedly rose from a poor background is seen as a valuable asset in that drive.

The imposition of Mundine is particularly provocative within the context of the factional warfare wracking the Liberal Party, however, because he was not even a member of the party. He was allowed to join on the day before his nomination and granted a waiver from a party rule requiring six months' membership before selection for parliament.

Until last week, in fact, Mundine was a member of the Liberal Democrats, the far-right libertarian party led by Senator David Leyonhjelm. He had been eyeing a Senate nomination from that group, which demands brutal cuts to social programs and the privatisation of all government services.

Before linking up with Leyonhjelm, Mundine was a prominent member of the Labor Party, rising to national

president in 2006–07. He was an unsuccessful Labor candidate for the Senate in 2001 and was defeated in a bid to gain Labor Party pre-selection for a western Sydney seat in 2004. He only quit the Labor Party in 2012 after it failed to appoint him to a Senate vacancy that year.

Moreover, Mundine may be ineligible to sit in federal parliament because one of his businesses received government contracts. Mundine told reporters he would sit down with lawyers and accountants on Thursday to transfer his business interests to ensure he is not in breach of the Australian Constitution.

Throughout Mundine’s seemingly opportunist twists and turns, there has been a consistent political thread. For decades, he has ardently praised the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996 for imposing, in partnership with the trade unions, the global pro-market program of de-regulation and privatisation at the expense of working class jobs and conditions.

As a natural progression from Labor’s wholesale assault on behalf of big business, Mundine has been an outspoken advocate of stripping welfare payments from recipients, particularly Aboriginal people, to give them no choice but to accept low-paid work on substandard conditions.

In 2015, for example, he defended the Abbott government’s imposition of draconian “work-for-the-dole” measures on remote Aboriginal communities, saying the greatest “threat” to indigenous Australians was “chronic welfare dependence.”

Together with other members of the privileged indigenous elite, Mundine has called for the breaking up of communal indigenous land ownership in favour of individual titles, to further foster the rise of a wealthy layer that exploits the labour power of impoverished Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

That was why both Abbott and his 1996–2007 prime ministerial predecessor John Howard appointed Mundine to their indigenous advisory councils. Under Abbott, he initiated programs to allocate government contracts to indigenous businesses, including ones in which he had interests.

To further promote those programs, always in the name of “economic empowerment” and “self-determination” for indigenous people, Mundine became a host on the Murdoch empire’s Sky News, where he has a program titled “Mundine Means Business.” Morrison reportedly views Mundine’s Sky News platform as important for agitating the small but vocal right-wing “base” that it attracts.

Mundine has long been an ally of major mining companies, helping them overcome Aboriginal objections to proposed projects on culturally and environmentally sensitive sites. He worked with iron ore magnate Andrew Forrest on the last Labor government’s “indigenous jobs strategy” to help mining and pastoral companies employ Aboriginal workers as cheap labour.

Mundine also champions the development of nuclear reactors and has been a keynote speaker at the Sydney Institute, a right-wing think tank headed by Gerard Henderson, whose daughter, Elizabeth, a corporate banker and consultant, Mundine married in 2013.

Leading corporate media outlets welcomed Mundine’s anointment. An *Australian Financial Review* editorial described him as an “asset” to the Liberal Party. It hailed Mundine for concluding, as a member of “the most hard-done-by group in Australia” that “dignity and independence could only come through economic strength, not the politics of the welfare system or a culture of grievance; through schooling, securing employment, home ownership, starting businesses and raising a family, like other Australians.”

Australian columnist Chris Kenny wrote: “It is a fine thing for the Coalition, our national affairs and our Aboriginal communities that Mundine wants to take his brand of commercial activism, self-reliance and indigenous enterprise into parliament.”

Mundine’s elevation is another demonstration of the essential bipartisan unity between Labor and the Coalition—he has been embraced and promoted by both for decades. It also is a further warning sign of preparations for savage austerity measures, aimed at imposing the burden of a deepening economic crisis on the working class, regardless of which party heads the next government.



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