

# 'This has become a farce': Top Liberal demands preselection intervention

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The man who nearly rolled controversial federal Liberal MP Craig Kelly has demanded the party intervene to save embattled state member Felicity Wilson from a preselection row he says has become a "farce" and an embarrassment.

Bitter preselection contests have infected the party at state and federal levels as contenders jostle for seats ahead of two elections in the first half of this year.



*North Shore MP Felicity Wilson won preselection by one vote in November. CREDIT: JAMES ALCOCK*

Kent Johns, vice-president of the NSW Liberal Party, wrote to state president Philip Ruddock on Wednesday night demanding party executives use special powers to endorse Ms Wilson over her hard-right rival Tim James, whom she beat in a preselection contest by one vote.

Mr James has vowed to take Supreme Court action to overturn the result, claiming it was not valid because an unidentified person bypassed identification checks to enter the preselection event, or because someone in the room voted twice.

Cr Johns - who was himself the victim of a special intervention to endorse all sitting federal MPs including Mr Kelly - said the party should urgently intervene to cement Ms Wilson as the Liberal candidate for North Shore ahead of the March election.



"Can I respectfully request an urgent special powers moron [sic] to endorse felicity Wilson. This has become not only a farce but an embarrassment," he wrote to Mr Ruddock and others on Wednesday.

"If that cannot be done please explain to me urgently why this cannot occur by fax ballot."

*NSW Liberal Party vice-president and Sutherland Shire councillor Kent Johns.  
CREDIT: KERRIE ARMSTRONG*

Mr Ruddock acknowledged receipt of the email but said he would not comment on internal party matters. Cr Johns also declined to comment when asked.

A former Labor mayor turned Liberal councillor, Cr Johns had the numbers to roll Mr Kelly, the Liberal member for Hughes, but was stymied when Prime Minister Scott Morrison sought an urgent ballot to endorse sitting MPs.

Unlike Ms Wilson, Cr Johns did not get the opportunity to contest a vote by local preselectors.

Ms Wilson, who gave birth to her first child just after Christmas, won the preselection contest in November by 101 votes to 100. Mr James challenged the result through the party's internal dispute resolution process but lost his second appeal this week.

In an email to state executive members on Wednesday night, Mr James said he understood the gravity of choosing to fight the outcome in the Supreme Court but wrote: "I believe justice is worth fighting for and one cannot in life walk past injustice.

"Given the significant issues of accountability and integrity the North Shore preselection has raised, as well as the fundamental importance of adherence to our party's constitution, it is a decision I firmly believe is the correct one," wrote Mr James, a former litigator with Allens.

However, a senior Liberal source said there would be "fury within the party" that Mr James was more focused on his own political career than the fortunes of the Liberal Party.

"I would have thought that a loyal Liberal would be more interested in seeing the party win two difficult elections," the source instead.

"Instead, we still don't have a candidate in the field in North Shore at the same time as we have independents circling."

The NSW Liberals are also yet to endorse candidates for several federal seats ahead of a poll expected in May, although most of those are safe Labor electorates. The party has not yet chosen a candidate for the marginal seat of Dobell, and former frontbencher and Malcolm Turnbull ally Craig Laundry has not decided whether to recontest his Sydney seat of Reid.

In the south coast seat of Gilmore, where sitting MP Ann Sudmalis is quitting politics, real estate agent Grant Schultz has been preselected by local members but is yet to be formally endorsed by the state executive.

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