

## Family First: a one church affair

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Commentary by Margo Kingston

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*This is the longer, more detailed version of a story which appeared in Saturday's SMH. I wonder why Howard hasn't told this particular church to stick to matters spiritual, like he does with churches who critique his policies. Roll on in, US style party-political religion.*

### Family First: a one church affair

by Mike Seccombe

When Joan Woods decided to run as a NSW Senate candidate for the Family First party in the upcoming election she turned, naturally, to her family first.

And they didn't let her down. Her son, Mike, is now the candidate for Hunter. Mike's wife, Melanie, is the candidate for an adjoining seat, Calare.

Then Mrs Woods turned to her wider network. Given her deep involvement in the Assemblies of God church - Joan's husband, pastor Ian Woods, is the NSW president of the Assemblies, and leads the Hawkesbury Church - it's no surprise where she found her other candidates.

Caroline Dorhauer, for example, who is the Family First candidate for Robertson, supplied the Electoral Commission with the contact number of the Hawkesbury Church (formerly the Hawkesbury Christian Centre).

Then there's the other Dorhauer, John, who is listed with the commission as 'pastor' and whose contact number is also the Hawkesbury church.

In fact, 11 or 12 of the candidates running under the Family First banner in NSW are connected to the Hawkesbury Church, according to church sources, substantially corroborated through Joan Woods (after confirming 10, she refused to continue to speak about the religious affiliations of others). And almost all the rest of the 24 candidates the suddenly-powerful party is putting up in NSW also are members of the Assemblies of God.

Mrs Woods concedes that almost all the Family First candidates are AOG adherents. She concedes many of them have only been in politics for a few weeks and many don't even live in the seats they are standing for.

"We're just a young party," she says. "I have to use what I've got in my hand in terms of my network, and those that relate to me. See, what I needed to do was field as many candidates as I could in the lower house..."

The reason is, while the lower house candidates have little chance of election, the party needed their 'bulk' to become a player in the preference-swapping game, and increase Mrs Woods' chances of winning the Senate seat.

In the absence of people actually living in many of the seats the party wanted to contest, outsiders were nominated. "We just chose electorates that were as close as possible to our electorate," she says.

Her son Michael and daughter Melanie might not actually live in the electorates they are running for, she says, but "Mike and Mel have family connections with them, and friends".

"It was kind of like the best we could do..."

While that might sound amateurish, Family First has shown remarkable sophistication in many of its preference deals. Its primary target is The Greens, even though that meant giving preferences to a gay Democrat, Brian Greig in Western Australia. And while it mostly prefers the Coalition, in Victoria

it has given preferences to a very socially-conservative Labor incumbent, Jacinta Collins.

Furthermore, as the ABC's election analyst Antony Green notes, the party has demonstrated a capacity to tightly control its church-going support base. In the South Australian election, for example, FF directed preferences to Labor in some seats and the Coalition in others. In both cases, about two-thirds of FF voters delivered their preferences as asked. That gives them powerful leverage.

But in the House of Representatives, the party has backed the Liberal Party in all but three seats, the Nationals in two and one independent.

Among the reasons given in a press release yesterday, announcing the preference ticket, was that Labor has done a cross-preference deal with the Greens and that both had moved "away from conservative family values", while the Liberal Party had remained "centrist in ethical and social values".

The release also said that "some Liberal candidates have been asked to sign a three-year voting agreement on certain FF policy platforms".

In other words, it offered its long-term support in return for binding members of another party to its conservative Christian platform.

But Mrs Woods insists there is there's "absolutely no connection" between FF and the Assemblies of God. "Not in any file, in any legally-written document, in [the party] constitution," she says.

What she means is there's no *legal* connection. However, three-and-a-half years after it was started up by a leading light of the Assemblies of God in South Australia, it remains almost totally populated by churchgoers of one faith.

Mrs Woods says she finds it "disappointing" that media attention should focus is on the religious affiliations of Family First.

"The guy that started it in South Australia, Andrew Evans, [now in the South Australian Parliament], I see media reports saying he's an AOG pastor," Joan Woods says. "He resigned two years before he got involved in this party. He resigned from Paradise Church two years before that!"

"It's not about us promoting our version of Christianity," she says. "We really just want to connect with people who care about families. What's wrong with that?"

Nothing at all, if its true. But the evidence points to something else. To the rise, for the first time in this country, of a broadly-organised American-style religious right in politics.

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