



## Evangelical about politics

By Mike Seccombe

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Joan Woods, from the Family First party and wife of the president of the Assemblies of God church in NSW, is adamant: there's "absolutely no connection" between the two organisations. Church and state are absolutely separate, says the party's lead NSW Senate candidate. There is no funding link between the two, indeed no formal link at all. "Not in any file, in any legally written document, in [the party] constitution," she says, a little indignantly.

What she means is there's no *legal* connection. However, 3 years after it was started by a leading light of the Assemblies of God in South Australia, it remains almost totally populated by churchgoers of one faith.

Family First has arisen from nowhere to become a powerful player in the election, largely through its impact on preference flows. It is running Senate candidates in all states and in more than 120 of the 150 House of Representatives seats in the nation.

But its significance goes beyond immediate concerns about preference flow. To some who know a lot about it, including one Assemblies of God dissident who contacted the *Herald*, Family First represents the strongest push yet by the religious right into politics, following the US model.

The *Herald* has not checked the religious affiliations of all Family First candidates, but given the genesis of the party and the backgrounds of its NSW team, it is almost exclusively comprised of people from Christian evangelical backgrounds. Close to half the candidates in the state, including Woods, have connections with one church, the Hawkesbury Church (formerly the Hawkesbury Christian Centre). For example, her son, Michael, and daughter-in-law Melanie, are candidates. So are several other paid employees of the church.

In fact, almost all the party's 24 candidates in NSW are Protestant evangelicals, overwhelmingly Assemblies of God and in many cases, pastors. The *Herald* has identified only one Family First candidate who was *not* a Christian evangelical.

Greg Briscoe-Hough is a Catholic father of six who "ran across" the party only a few months ago while he was "doing some work about film classifications and was getting involved with a few of the people in the SA upper house". He contacted the NSW branch only about four to six weeks ago. Now he's the candidate for Banks, in Sydney.

Previously, Briscoe-Hough had investigated joining Fred Nile's Christian Democrats, and says he is motivated by concern that other parties - he says the Australian Democrats in particular - have "weird" social policies in areas like the "gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/intersex agenda".

"I wasn't aware of the Assemblies of God position until maybe two weeks ago," he says. "It never entered into my mind whether they were one denomination or another."

All that mattered is they shared his view about the "importance of families".

"They provide, like, the texts [for campaigning] and all that sort of stuff," says Briscoe-Hough. "We have a responsibility to, sort of, raise some funds."

Like him, Jennifer Weller, who is standing for Farrer, on the NSW-Victoria border, has been a candidate for only a short time. She was recruited, though, in a more standard way: through her membership of an Assemblies of God church in Corowa. "I only said I'd do it two weeks ago," Weller says. "I've only spoken to Joan Woods over the phone."

Despite the fact that she was drafted into running through her church, she says Family First "is not about being Christian. It's about putting the family first. It doesn't matter if you're a Muslim, a

bohemian, a Buddhist or what you are".

Except there are no Muslims or Buddhists, and certainly no bohemians, in Family First.

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