

## So God said: go to NSW and create poll mayhem

By Malcolm Brown

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A family-values party that was founded in Adelaide less than three years ago is shaping as one of the key players in the federal election - to the dismay of better-known Christian campaigners.

The Family First Party has raised eyebrows with its hard-nosed preference deals and extensive campaign operation.

Originating at the Paradise Assemblies of God church in Adelaide, it has only one parliamentarian, retired pastor Andrew Evans, in the South Australian upper house.

Now it is fielding candidates in 125 federal lower house seats across the nation, and in the Senate, and forging preference deals that may decide a number of seats.

Not everyone is happy with this new conservative force.

Phil Lamb, NSW director of the Christian Democrats, said: "They started in South Australia and God told them to come to NSW. They have not got the word 'Christian' anywhere on their website. I think that is quite deceptive. They are hiding the fact that they are Assemblies of God people."

The party appears to be gathering significant support. It denies "extremist" labels and has reportedly registered support of about 4 per cent in polls in South Australia and Queensland.

In Queensland, where one of its Senate candidates, John Lewis, is national vice-president of the Assemblies of God, it claims strong support in the central and northern parts of the state. The party's federal chairman, Peter Harris, has said the party will win seats in Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia.

Established in NSW in June, the party is fielding candidates in 24 NSW federal seats and two Senate candidates, former Hawkesbury councillor Joan Woods and a marriage counsellor, Dr Ivan Herald.

The party

will direct its first preferences to the ALP in Victoria and Tasmania. In NSW, its first preferences go to the Christian Democrats, and in Queensland to Hetty Johnston, campaigner against child sex abuse.

Fred Nile's Christian Democrats admit the new party, though not antagonistic, will split its vote.

"I think Family First is just another Liberal Party," Mr Lamb said.

"What they have not told the public is their agenda. We are a Christian party and represent Christian values. They are ... prepared to do a deal with anybody just to get their numbers up."

Mr Nile told the *Herald*: "Some of the Assemblies of God pastors have told us they think it is their duty to support Family First. What they have tried to do is to develop a policy document that does not mention God, Jesus or Church. We are hoping we will get more votes than them.

"But we are exchanging preferences with them."

Joan Woods said the party was independent of any church. "We are family-based," she said. "On our national executive we have a Uniting Church member and a Baptist and a Catholic.

"We are reaching out to people who simply value family and wish to be represented.

"I have supported Fred Nile for a long time. He is close to what I consider to be strong family values. If he gets in I would be really, really pleased."

Pastor Brian Houston, the national president of the Assemblies of God church, said several people from the church supported Family First.

"But as far as I am aware there is no instruction on how Assemblies of God is to vote," Pastor Houston said.

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