

Performance will come first for Family First

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We've got to have a good hard look at who's behind Family First. We'll also be having a good hard look at where their money came from. They had a very slick campaign. Our booth workers were amazed at the quality of their material. [Tim Gartrell, Labor Party national press secretary]

[Family First] have not got the word 'Christian' anywhere on their website. I think it is quite deceptive. They are hiding the fact that they are Assemblies of God people. [Phil Lamb, NSW Director, Christian Democrats]

Give me a womaniser, reformed alcoholic, humanist, atheist or even a lapsed Catholic any day, rather than the Bible-reading politicians we seem to be propagating in the Parliament these days. [letter to the editor]

With 11,856,256 (91.05%) of the votes counted nationwide, the Family First Party has received 225,401 votes in the House of Representatives and 188,582 votes in the Senate. The votes represent about 1.9% of the voting Australian public; but because of complex preference deals, the party may well win a Victorian Senate seat, alongside the outright Senate majority that the Coalition has all but secured (at the time of writing). Several anxious responses have followed this surprisingly successful electoral debut.

- There have been those preference deals. For example, Greens are said to have been 'outraged' by the Democrats' decision to preference Family First before the Greens on the NSW Senate ballot.
- The party's links to the Assemblies of God (AOG) group of churches have produced a rash of speculation about its motives and intentions. Greens leader Bob Brown echoes Tim Gartrell's concerns (above), calling the party a "conspiratorial set-up" with "extreme right religious connections". For Owen Richards in the Green Left Weekly, "The AOG connection runs deep despite the party's recent attempts to obscure the relationship." Elsewhere, its backers and constituency are described as 'shadowy', 'obscure' and 'unclear'.
- The success of the party is being portrayed as a threat to the separation of church and state. According to this fear, the party is a Trojan horse for a kind of theocratic rule that will "force everyone to live by laws derived by a literal but narrow and very selective reading of traditional holy scriptures", as one writer to the Green Left Weekly put it.

The purpose of this briefing is not to endorse Family First. Of course, our previous briefings will indicate that we agree with some areas of Family First policy (which can be examined at <http://www.familyfirst.org.au>). But some of their policies are not developed in detail; and only time will tell whether their policies are workable and if their politics help or hinder a peaceful Australia.

Rather, the purpose of this briefing is to respond to what can only be described as extreme silliness in these reactions to the party's success. We seek here to clarify some general points about the workings of our democracy, and some specific points about Family First itself.

For one opinion writer, "the media has alternated between ignoring the party and attempting to uncover sinister links with the Assemblies of God church, which brought us such malevolent figures as *Australian Idol* winner Guy Sebastian." Comparisons with the Taliban are indeed somewhat premature, and our media do tend to flip between boredom and hysteria in their reporting on religion.

But more to the point, the accusation that Family First blurs the distinction between church and state while also 'obscuring' their links to Christianity, seems very fatuous. On the face of it, the *best* way for a party *not* to blur the distinction between church and state is to build a 'Chinese wall' between itself and its religious origins. In this respect, Family First has worked towards implementing a responsible political philosophy.

Rather more significant is the display of total ignorance about church-state separation. This distinction refers to the way no one religion is 'established' as the State's religion, so that the State may offer no coercion for or against a particular religion. But church-state separation has never been taken to preclude public policy platforms that which spring from Christian moral vision, basically because *all* policy platforms in public life spring from *some* moral vision. It is simply not possible to disentangle the two. Every party represents some school of moral thought, lived-out in terms of the policies it fights for.

All along, Family First have said no more and no less than that they have a platform based in a 'socially conservative' moral vision, just as the Greens, Liberals, Labor and Democrats also have platforms rooted in different accounts of moral reality, which in turn have religious or philosophical or ideological underpinnings. Yet few would take the Greens to task for their members' links with environmental and new-age spirituality. As the Greens have developed a broad coalition of support amongst those who share their values, so the challenge is for Family First to do the same.

In the case of Family First, their platform is to look for the impact of proposed government legislation and policy upon family life. Their claim is that such a platform is of interest to a wide cross-section of modern Australians, irrespective of their religious affiliation, and the election result seems to vindicate that claim. A perusal of the Family First policy platform reveals a less than extreme response to many issues of the day. The party supports income-splitting, proposes tax deductions for education expenses, and seeks for internet pornography to be filtered. The party is against the termination of life, but says it respects a properly informed decision-making process.

One of their Queensland Senate candidates explained to a recent gathering in Canberra that although he himself was a Christian, his party was not a 'Christian party'. It existed solely to audit proposed legislative and policy changes for their effect on families, and did *not* exist to make Australia Christian, which he took to be the task of churches. (See our briefing #021.) Party Chairman Peter Harris summarised in an interview as follows:

There are absolutely no formal links [to the AOG]. Obviously there are relational links and networks exist. But let me say this about all those people that have been saying that throughout this campaign; it amazed me talking to a group of journalists and reporters the other day. When I asked them, I said, 'Have you actually read our policies?' And many of them actually hadn't read our policies but they've gone with the populist view ... that we are extremist in some respect. We would see ourselves as being socially conservative ...

Outrage over preference deals should be dismissed as mere pantomime. Family First simply played the political game, played it well, and surprised observers simply because they were a group not typically associated with canny politics. Preference deals were based on replies given by other candidates to a Family First questionnaire on how that candidate would vote on matters of Family First policy. This seems like an uncontroversial and highly sensible way to organise preferences. Without wishing to endorse all that he says, it is hard to resist Frank Devine's rather cheeky commentary:

Of course, much of the righteous indignation claimed over the invasion of secular politics by Family First ... is phony. The rage is really about the way the second preferences of conservative candidates stuffed the Australian Greens, possibly forever, and profoundly disappointed the 'progressive' Left for this election at least. That nobody, including the opinion pollsters, saw Family First coming exposes the complacent contempt of Australian elites for religion.

But what about the emphasis upon 'family' that Family First stands for? This, of course, is the point where Christians need to think carefully and theologically. Jesus continually reminds people of the dangers of family, e.g.:

He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.' [Luke 9:59-62]

In other words, the good of family can dangerously distract from what is most important. Jesus cannot really be thought of as the founder of a 'family values' religion, especially since he and his apostles also uphold the good of celibate singleness. In addition, there is much in the Scriptures leading us to insist that a 'good' society must retain ample room, without prejudice, for families without a 'nuclear' core. For all sorts of reasons, families will be childless, or broken, or rebled, or different. In Israelite society, the widower, the orphan and the fatherless are given special care and nurture. We do well to extend this care to extend to single mothers, divorcees and families blended several times—and even to children cared for by homosexual partners, even if we disagree with their carers' lifestyle.

But care and acceptance for people in such arrangements does *not* equate with promoting those arrangements; and something *does* seem to have gone wrong in a society that does not naturally produce and keep a large proportion of families with a 'nuclear' core—families, that is, beginning with a lifelong faithful marriage, and blossoming into a collection of children. That is, while we are in 'this age', Scripture also gives us ample reason to work toward the sustenance and promotion of many, many such families. Deliberate policies to sustain, protect and promote such families is *not* the same as oppressing people who are not of such families. Such policies straightforwardly represent a strong claim about what best constitutes a peaceful, stable, friendly and prosperous society. Since we already have environmental impact statements, Family First simply wants to know about the impact of proposed societal changes upon the future of these kinds of families. (We hope that their impact statements would also seek for the sustenance and nurture of other kinds of families, even if the party does not actually seek to create more non-nuclear families.)

Whether or not Family First will do all this well or badly, and whether or not their idea is a good one, will depend upon their performance in the parliamentary process (if they win a seat)—after which the voters will again decide.

*Andrew Cameron & Tracy Gordon,
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

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