

Right-wing Christian party may gain the balance of power in Australian Senate

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While last weekend's elections saw Prime Minister John Howard secure a comfortable majority in Australia's House of Representatives, counting is yet to be finalised for the upper house or Senate, with complete results not expected for another two weeks.

According to current trends, however, the Howard government has won at least 38 seats in the 76-seat Senate and may yet obtain an outright majority—something no prime minister has enjoyed for more than two decades.

But the most surprising result is the possible election of Steve Fielding from Family First, a right-wing formation aligned with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. He is poised to win a Senate seat and, if the government fails to win an outright majority, could hold the balance of power in the upper house. Two other Family First candidates also have a chance of winning a position.

This relatively unknown party only achieved a small percentage of the vote. With the voting yet to be finalised, Fielding has secured just over 46,000 first preference votes, or 1.8 percent, of the three million cast in Victoria—a fifth of those for a Greens candidate, who has received 7.5 percent of the vote. The fact that Fielding is likely to win a Senate seat—ahead of the Greens—is the outcome of Australia's anti-democratic preferential voting system and the backroom vote-swapping deals carried out by the major parties.

Under the Australian electoral system, not only is voting compulsory but it is also compulsory to give a preference to all candidates in order to register a valid vote. If one candidate does not achieve an outright majority or, in the case of the Senate, a quota, then preferences are distributed until that is the case.

Compulsory preferential voting was introduced to shore up the two-party system—in the final analysis, voters are compelled to make a choice between the major parties. All of this is hailed as “democratic” and allowing a greater range of choice. In reality, however, it is undemocratic because certain vital choices are excluded. A voter cannot simply vote for one party and leave the rest of the ballot blank, but is forced to mark a preference against candidates they may not agree with, or know anything about.

The voting system is particularly pernicious in the Senate. Because of the generally large number of candidates, there is the option of simply voting “above the line”—that is, putting a one against the preferred party—and accepting the preferences listed by that party with the Electoral Commission. Many voters avoid voting “below the line” because that means placing numbers, in

order of preference, alongside the names of all candidates. In the state of New South Wales, for instance, there were 78 candidates.

It will no doubt have come as a complete surprise to many voters to find that their vote for Labor, Liberal and other parties may actually contribute to the election of a repugnant right-wing candidate because of preference deals done by those parties with Family First.

Fielding fell far short of the necessary 330,000 for a Senate seat. But because Labor, Liberal and the Australian Democrats preferred Family First ahead of the Greens, his vote will continue to climb, while the tally for the Greens of about 205,000 first preference votes will remain relatively static. If he does win the seat, Fielding will sit in the Senate courtesy of the Labor Party and the Democrats, in particular.

To the vast majority of Australians, Family First is virtually unknown. In fact, it was established just over three years ago and, apart from the 2002 election of Andrew Evans to the South Australian state parliament, it had no other MPs. Evans, a Pentecostal pastor and former missionary in Papua New Guinea, is a member of the Assemblies of God world executive and wrote its constitution.

The party's official program consists of vague demands about protecting families and the rights of children. It calls for legislation to defend “the health, welfare and unity of families” and improve their standard of living and laws to protect children, the homeless and the aged. This is combined with calls for the introduction of socially regressive and anti-democratic measures, including opposition to abortion, same-sex marriages and stem cell research, as well as populist appeals on various local issues. A central feature of Family First's campaign in Victoria, for example, was not bans on abortion or gay marriage, which were deliberately kept in the background, but opposition to tolls on a new freeway in the state capital Melbourne.

Family First preys upon the widespread fears and insecurities generated by growing social inequality and economic uncertainty and seeks to divert these sentiments along the reactionary path of religious fundamentalism. Leaked documents demonstrate its extreme right-wing, anti-democratic and sectarian religious character.

John Lewis, one of Family First's leading Senate candidates, has called for better tax treatment for ministers of religion, “upholding the family unit in our society based on Biblical standards” and a long-term aim of officially proclaiming Australia as “the great

south land of the Holy Spirit". During the election, one party member called for lesbians to be burnt at the stake.

Danny Nalliah, a Family First Victorian Senate candidate, issued a leaflet describing brothels, liquor shops, mosques and temples as "Satan's strongholds" and calling for their destruction. Nalliah, a pastor with the Catch the Fire Ministries, is facing legal action over accusations that he publicly vilified Muslims at a seminar last year.

Conscious of the lack of mass support for its real program, Family First has been at pains to disguise its Christian fundamentalist perspective. The party's federal chairman, Peter Harris, has denied the party's homophobic outlook and claimed Family First was "not a church party".

Immediately after the election, Family First moved to rein in some of its more vocal candidates. In a press release on October 14, the party said its four leading Senate candidates would not make any media comments until after the count had been finalised. It announced that all other Family First candidates had been disendorsed. The directive sought to ensure that the party could officially disavow any of the more extreme or bigoted post-election statements made by its former candidates.

According to Harris, a property developer and senior figure in the Assemblies of God, Family First decided to intervene in the federal election 18 months ago because it was concerned about the "demise of the Democrats and the surge of the Greens", which it claimed was undermining "traditional family values".

Family First selected a number of Pentecostal church pastors or their close relatives to run over 120 candidates for seats in the House of Representative and Senate. Its election campaign, however, largely consisted of electoral deals with other political parties. Howard's Coalition, the Labor Party, Australian Democrats, Australians Against Further Immigration, Pauline Hanson's One Nation and a range of other parties scrambled to secure electoral pacts with the organisation. In South Australia, it secured a preference swapping arrangement with every party except the Greens.

Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello were particularly anxious to link up with Family First and, in fact, both have courted the organisation since its foundation. Howard officially opened a 3,500-seat Assembly of God auditorium in northwest Sydney in October 2002 while Costello was a guest speaker at a 30,000-strong Assembly of God conference in July.

A leading Assemblies of God official previously declared that Costello had been anointed by god to be the Treasurer. Costello, who has publicly lamented the "weakening of Australia's traditional Judeo-Christian values", hailed the church for promoting the "values that made our country strong".

As well as their essential political agreement with Family First, Howard and Costello were anxious to shore up electoral support from the organisation to counteract preference arrangements between Labor and the Greens. As part of his deal with the Christian party, Howard agreed to establish "family impact" investigations into all future legislation.

This deal was struck despite the refusal of Family First to direct its preferences to a Queensland Liberal candidate, Ingrid Tall, because she is gay. When asked to explain, Howard told the

media: "I would rather give my preferences to a party like that than I would to the Greens... I don't discriminate against people according to their sexual preference but we have to make choices... through a mixture of principle and pragmatism."

Not to be outdone, the Labor Party rushed to cement electoral arrangements with Family First. Two months before the election, Howard introduced an amendment to the Marriage Act to ban same-sex marriages. Having previously rejected this discriminatory legislation, Labor parliamentarians dropped all opposition and voted with the government to pass the amendment.

Labor has played a key role in creating the political conditions for the rise of Family First. Many of its parliamentarians support the policies of the Christian right on stem cell research, abortion and more restrictive censorship laws. Several Labor MPs are members of the Lyons Forum, a right-wing Christian parliamentary lobby group, which has supported attacks on freedom of expression.

In fact, one of the largest contributors to Fielding's likely election to the Senate has been the Labor Party. Labor directed its preferences to Family First in exchange for backing for Labor Senator Jacinta Collins, who is a strident anti-abortionist. While Collins failed to hold her Senate seat, her second preferences will go to Family First, boosting Fielding's chances of election.

Speaking after the election, Labor's Victorian state secretary Eric Locke defended this grubby undertaking, claiming it was "not a mistake" but had been the "best strategy" for Labor's Senate vote.

The willingness of the major parties to wheel and deal with Family First once again underscores the right-wing character of the political establishment as a whole and sets the stage for the further erosion of democratic rights and principles, including the separation of church and state.



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