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Atheist asks politicians to nail their beliefs to a wall

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ALARMED by increasing evidence of the involvement of religious groups in politics, the Atheist Foundation of Australia has launched a survey of the beliefs of candidates in this year's federal election.

Questionnaires on issues such as abortion, sex education and voluntary euthanasia have been sent to several hundred MPs and candidates. More will be sent as challengers emerge.

"Citizens should be able to make an informed choice on election day," said David Nicholls, the president of the federation, yesterday. "Religion should have no part in politics. Church and state must remain separate."

The federation, which refuses to disclose how many members it has, claims to speak on behalf of as many as half of Australians, though it concedes that the figure is difficult to prove.

Famously, more Australians claimed to be Jedi than atheists in the 2001 census, while 27 per cent of Australians professed no religion. Mr Nicholls argues that the figures are grossly misleading.

"For one thing, people feel they have to tick a box in answer to a question that is premeditated, that presumes they have a religion. Not surprisingly, they answer robotically.

"For another, whoever fills in the form - father or whoever - speaks for their children. That is unacceptable. Children have not made a choice, they are incapable of making a choice," said Mr Nicholls. The federation insists that religious instruction has no place in the education of minors.

The atheist initiative coincides with the intervention by the Archbishop of Sydney, George Pell, in the stem cell research debate, and the statement by Tony Abbott, the Minister for Health, that his Catholic faith did not drive his decision-making.

It also comes amid a surge of interest in faith, belief and God, prompted by the growth of religious extremism, the rise of the so-called religious right and a rush of books by writers such as Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*.

The atheist foundation is hugely encouraged by the debate, which it hopes will lead to pressing world problems being solved through the application of reason rather than faith, superstition and dogma.

By last night, though, only three candidates had responded to the questionnaire. Mr Nicholls is not altogether surprised. Politicians, he says, prefer to evade committing themselves and acknowledging the largely silent atheist community.

So does the media, he suggests: "They're always seeking out the views of the churches, never those who will speak on behalf of the millions of non-believers in Australia."

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