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Libs told Brethren how to get votes

- *Matthew Denholm*
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THE Tasmanian Liberal Party has confirmed it advised members of the Exclusive Brethren on how to design election material targeting the Greens, but denies funding the sect's advertising.

Liberal state director Damien Mantach told The Australian yesterday there was nothing improper about his assistance to sect members in the lead-up to last year's March state election.

"Did we discuss brochures and strategies as to how you might target the Green vote? Yeah, we did. Absolutely," he said. "Some of the advice I gave to the Brethren was pretty straight up and down, and that is: Green policies don't stack up and one of the best techniques is to highlight what their policies are and what those policies mean.

"Compare and contrast. That was some of the advice I was providing to them. Did I say you should use this language or that language? No. We didn't get into that sort of detail. They were very concerned about the Greens' social policies."

Mr Mantach said while he did not support the form some of the resulting Brethren election material took, he would not hesitate to meet sect members again.

Hobart woman Martine Delaney has complaints before Tasmania's Anti-Discrimination Tribunal against sect member and pig farmer Roger Unwin, the Liberal Party and its advertising agent, Chris Guesdon.

Ms Delaney's complaint alleges that ads authorised by Mr Unwin incited hatred by claiming policies recognising the rights of transgender people would "ruin families and societies".

Documents show the ads were placed on the direction of a senior Brethren member, Graham Lewis. They also show that while three newspapers billed the ads to an advertising account held by Mr Guesdon on behalf of the Liberal Party, the bill was ultimately paid by a shelf company set up by three Brethren members 11 days before the poll.

This is a similar method to that in which sect members funded ads during the last federal campaign in a number of states.

The Brethren denies co-ordinating a campaign. However, federal police are considering investigating a Brethren company, Willmac Enterprises, for possible breaches of federal electoral disclosure laws.

Tasmania does not have comprehensive third-party election funding disclosure laws and mysterious front groups are not uncommonly cited as authorising agents for advertising.

Documents from the advertising departments of three daily newspapers confirm that, as revealed in The Australian in January, the newspapers were all led to believe the ads were to be paid for by the Liberals. Mr Guesdon has insisted this was due to an administrative error.

Ms Delaney said yesterday while she accepted the Brethren shelf company, TRADTAS, ultimately paid the accounts, she felt several parties were being "less than honest". "This has confirmed in my mind that there appears to be some link between the Liberal Party and the Brethren in this that they're not being honest about," she said.

She said the involvement of Mr Lewis contradicted Mr Unwin's previous claim that neither the Brethren nor its leaders were involved in the ad campaign. However, Mr Unwin stood by his statements last night.

Mr Mantach said he believed the Brethren, a fundamentalist Christian sect that believes in separation from the wider community and bans voting by its followers, were being unfairly characterised by the Greens and others as an "evil sect".

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