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Quiet is the new loud

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KEVIN Rudd is becoming adept at the political art of the back pedal. At this rate, it won't be long before he hops on a unicycle and starts juggling chainsaws.

In August last year, Rudd called on four separate government agencies, including the Australian Federal Police, to investigate the activities of the Exclusive Brethren. Rudd described the kooky cult as “extremist” and in the business of “breaking up families.”

It looked just like we were headed for a good, old-fashioned witch burning, post-election (by gar, it's been a while) but those expecting the return of the Spanish Inquisition (I know, I know - no one expects the Spanish Inquisition), were left disappointed and disheartened.

Just six months later, Rudd advised that he would not support calls for a broad inquiry in to the Exclusive Brethren, as it would impinge on the rights of Brethren folk to practice their faith freely and openly.

In February, Rudd's office had received a detailed letter written by a former member of the sect, Peter Flinn, calling for an examination into “disproportionately high taxpayer funding of Brethren schools, dishonest political campaigning, charitable status in relation to rate and tax exemptions, and their well-known intimidatory tactics during traumatic Family Court cases.”

The document was signed by Flinn and 33 other former members of the Exclusive Brethren. It contained personal accounts of the emotional damage wrought as a result of the Exclusive Brethren's doctrine of separation; where those who leave the sect are prohibited from contacting their families.

It took a full three months for Rudd's office to reply. This time there were no public comments from the Prime Minister; just a tersely worded letter to Flinn, from Rudd's chief of staff, David Epstein, indicating that Rudd's anger had been assuaged somewhere between opposition and government.

The Exclusive Brethren has its roots in an evangelical movement in the 1820s, known as the Plymouth Brethren. The sect first stood on its own two feet in the 1850s, after a split with the main assembly. Initially at least, it was a gentle group of people not unlike the Mennonites and Anabaptists.

After a series of schisms in the 20th Century, the Exclusive Brethren globally is now a loose coalition of various splinter groups. The generic term is often attributed to the sect in Australia but the predominant group is more accurately known as the Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren.

They have as many 40,000 members worldwide. Of those approximately 10,000 live in this country.

Popularly, the Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren is renowned for eschewing technology, but businesses owned by members of the sect are known to use email and do their accounts using computers.

Their children aren't quite so fortunate.

Brethren children between the ages of 11 and 17 are educated at Brethren-owned schools. In 2006, the Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren received \$20.7 million in Commonwealth funding for its 31 schools nationwide.

Most modern texts and novels are banned and the curriculum is designed and written by senior Brethren members. Students are not permitted to undertake any formal tertiary education.

In 2004, the Brethren won a temporary exemption from testing their children for computer literacy, from the then education minister Brendan Nelson.

Last year, these matters clearly troubled Kevin Rudd.

Back in Opposition, Rudd was at pains to point out that Exclusive Brethren kids were at a considerable disadvantage to their contemporaries in mainstream schools: “I believe that there are real problems with the provision of modern education to kids under their system where they, for example, are not given full range of access to information technology.”

But today in Government apparently, Rudd has no such cause for concern.

As election promises go, it might rate as non-core, but Rudd's 180 degree turn shows he talks the talk in opposition but fails to walk the walk in government.

Or when he does, he often goes in reverse.

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