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Exclusive Brethren can vote in New Zealand election, report says

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Wellington - Members of New Zealand's Exclusive Brethren religious sect have been given permission to vote in this year's general election, a newspaper reported on Saturday. Seven members of the secretive religious sect caused a stir in the last election campaign in 2005, when they were revealed to have spent an estimated 1.2 million New Zealand dollars (about 925,000 US dollars) funding a leaflet campaign trying to oust the ruling Labour Party and its Green Party allies.

The move followed similar campaigns in Australia and Canada, although the church was known to have forbidden its members from voting, saying God was the only authority they recognised.

But the Weekend Herald quoted Exclusive Brethren spokesman for New Zealand and Australia, Tony McCorkell, as saying voting was "a matter of conscience" for individual members and would not be discouraged.

He told the paper there had been no directive from the sect's leader, Sydney businessman Bruce Hales, who is known as the "elect vessel", about voting or whom to vote for.

In April, McCorkell distanced the sect's leadership from the seven members after their spokesman Neville Simmons said they were considering launching another campaign this year when Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark will seek a fourth three-year term.

As well as allowing voting, the Herald said the sect had turned its back on other beliefs to permit members to use cellphones and let their children be taught using computers at school.

McCorkell said the Exclusive Brethren had 7,000 members in New Zealand but only 2,316 chose it when giving their religious affiliation in a national census in 2006.

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