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# EXCLUSIVE with the ELUSIVE

THE BRETHERN BREAK THEIR SILENCE

They're accused of trying to manipulate elections across the world, they're different, they're aloof, they're under concerted political attack and they don't like talking to the media. All the right reasons, then, for Investigate to persuade the businessmen involved to front up on where their money came from, why private eyes were hired, who authorized the move against Labour and whether, given the chance again, they'd do it differently. **IAN WISHART** has the story

**A**s Edwardian villas go, this one is a monster, stretching back from the roadside and looking every inch the grand mansion it used to be in its heyday. On a quiet street in leafy Epsom, I get only seconds for this first impression before I'm already on the doormat reaching for the old Edwardian twist-n-turn door ringer. Naturally, like most of that vintage, it doesn't work, but one quick tap on the opaque glass door pane and it springs open with a paw extended to mine in a firm greeting.

"Mr Wishart, I presume?"

Right about now, I think to myself, I wouldn't be surprised to see *Sunday Star-Times* journalist Tony Wall pounce from behind a bush with a photographer in tow accompanied by a loud "Aha!" followed by a banner headline in tomorrow's paper about "Despicable Investigate Editor's Secret Meeting With Right Wing Cult".

Mercifully, it doesn't happen; but the 'guilt by association' road trip the media and Labour politicians are currently embarking on has raised a number of questions about the Exclusive Brethren and the way they've become cannon-fodder on an unprecedented scale.

Granted, they maintain a degree of separation from wider society, but certainly not to the extent that the Amish do in the United States.

Granted, the headscarves, long hair and clothing look alien to a generation brought up on watching a gyrating Madonna pretend to crucify herself on MTV while wearing next to nothing in the name of "art".

Granted, they don't have TVs and so miss out on those "must-see" episodes of *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* that exemplify the apex of Western Civilisation.

But how is it that simply meeting an Exclusive Brethren member now requires the wearing of a special armband so that "good and honest" people can now shun you? How is it that the right of any New Zealand citizen to lobby politicians is now dependent on whether the citizen is approved of by



Neville Simmons

the Government? How is it that newspapers can run headlines reporting that a Brethren person helped nail up an election boarding, yet ignore the vast sums of money allegedly stolen from trade union members by Labour Party activists to help bankrupt Labour at the last election?

The face behind the handshake on the doorstep belongs to Greg Mason, reportedly the "leader" of the Brethren in New Zealand, although it's an honorific he and his colleagues scoff at – given that that church has no hierarchy, no clergy, and that actions taken in the name of the church require authorization by entire congregations. In a country where the wider society, and particularly politics, is dominated by leadership and hierarchy, it is a point of frustration to these mostly-Auckland businessmen and church members that the media feel the need to impose their own hierarchy expectations on them. Ironically, the Green Party – at the opposite end of the political spectrum to these men – has voiced similar frustrations over the difficulties the media had in coming to grips with the consensus decisions of the Greens and the hierarchy of the dual-leader system.

The media need to feel that the people they're quoting on any issue are important, which is why so many news stories are sprinkled with adjectives like "top official" or "leading" or "senior". Hence, over the past month, stories like "...Brethren leader Greg Mason...", "...senior members of the sect..." and so on have added to the blurring in the public mind of the line between a group of ordinary businessmen who belong to the

Exclusive Brethren church, and the church itself.

The men I'm meeting on this sunny but brisk Auckland Saturday are at pains to point out that they're no further down the pecking order than anyone else in the 7,000 to 8,000 strong Brethren community in New Zealand. They just happen to share – as business owners – many of the concerns other Brethren business owners have about Government policies, they happen to share – as conservative churchgoers – many of the concerns currently aggravating conservatives in the Catholic and Presbyterian churches, as well as many atheists and agnostics worried about the Government's social engineering excesses

**T**he Exclusive Brethren have, of course, had a Queen Elizabeth might call an *annus horribilis* publicity-wise. On top of the most recent collapse of the Private Eye affair, some would argue the course of an election turned on a dime last year when the media claimed Brethren pennies had been used to pay for some anti-Green pamphlets just weeks out from election. Despite the seven businessmen involved putting their hands up at a news conference to explain why they'd done it, and the media continued to paint it as an "Exclusive Brethren" conspiracy, supposedly ordained by the church as part of some wider global goal of interfering in elections.

It is true that Brethren members in a number of countries lobbied voters via election pamphlets, but does that translate "vast, right wing conspiracy" as Hillary Clinton might call it simply a desire like many others to have their voices heard?

After all, while the group of seven businessmen spent a lot of money on lobbying at the last election, little if any money has been paid to how much trade unions, gay and lesbian organizations, or even the Rastafarian Church and others don't in money and time to the re-election of Labour.

Bear that in mind as you read this introduction to a 200-page book on the Brethren by the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Dr Braitwaite:

"There are fears the secretive Christian sect the Exclusive Brethren could use its "bag of dirty tricks" to influence a year's state election, the NSW Greens say.

"The fundamentalist Christian group has been accused of lobbying for right-wing causes during recent elections in NSW, St. Australia and Tasmania, New Zealand, the US and Canada.

Look at the loaded phrasing: fears... secretive... Christian sect... dirty tricks... influence... fundamentalist... Christian (again)... agitating... right-wing. And that's just in two sentences.

The NZ Labour Party, which took over a million dollars in anonymous donations prior to sweeping into power in the 1999 election, is now facing possible defeat at the next election and wants to out anonymous donors this time around to prevent National from pulling the same stunt. Labour is using the bogymen of "Brethren influence" to try and get support from the public.

It was the election pamphlets that set the agenda for a sustained Labour attack on the Brethren, fuelled by a news item who assumed the words "Exclusive Brethren" should have appeared on the pamphlets even though the documents were discussing secular issues.

In a submission to the Justice and Electoral Reform Committee at Parliament earlier this year, the businessmen hit back:

"The leaflets have been funded by our team with no finan

contributions from any political party or from overseas.  
All statements in our pamphlets were based on information  
from reputable publicly available sources.  
All names of persons authorizing the pamphlets were bona  
fide and all addresses given were residential or business addresses  
and were either owned or leased by the authorizing person.  
Advice was sought from the Chief Electoral Officer – Mr.  
David Henry – in June 2005 regarding our plans. Acting on  
his recommendations, we modified our leaflets and indepen-  
dent legal counsel was retained.  
The New Zealand Police have fully investigated the allega-  
tions made against us and have concluded there was no breach  
of electoral law.

Accusations that we were secretive because we failed to dis-  
close our religious affiliation were unjust in the extreme. No  
commentators, journalists, and/or editors are expected to  
discuss their religious beliefs alongside their opinions.

By exercising our democratic right by participating in the  
debate, we were doing nothing more than others have  
done previously in New Zealand's history."

When the *New Zealand Herald's* criticism of the actions of the  
Brethren, it seems surprising that the newspaper still publishes  
it to the editor from Helen Clark's media advisor Brian  
Edwards without disclosing Edwards' relationship to Labour –  
a simple perhaps of the double standards the Brethren com-  
mitted to Parliament of.

Attacks on the church from Government politicians have  
been made by members of the Brethren, particularly – they say – because  
historically they've worked more closely with Labour than any  
other party.

One high-profile Government politician has had  
a family inside the Brethren church for a long  
time and as a young person attended church  
services of the Brethren, and maintained contact  
with them, despite the widely-held-but-erroneous  
belief that the Brethren have few if any ties with the out-  
side world. This same politician is one of those wheeled out by  
the media to criticize the Brethren regardless.

On some occasions, members of the Exclusive Brethren church  
approach Government to discuss matters that directly affect  
the church itself, such as its schools. On other occasions, simply  
individually, they lobby parliamentarians on issues that have  
nothing to do with the Brethren church but more to do with  
issues that other New Zealanders are equally concerned about  
such as our defence forces being one example, civil unions  
and so on – "although we're nowhere near as obsessed with civil  
unions as the media paint us," laughs one of the businessmen.

Ordinary citizens who pay taxes and employ ordinary, non-Brethren  
New Zealanders, members of the church are equally affected  
by government policies and their social costs as everyone else  
elsewhere. For example, don't discriminate on the basis of reli-  
gion, nor do hospital waiting lists.

Despite the pasting they've taken from the Government, the  
Brethren men say they've been well received by many Labour  
politicians in the current administration, and they're grateful for  
the ties with Labour go back a long way – back in the  
days of Walter Nash used to greet Brethren sitting in the pub-  
lic library (even then) with a cheery wave on first name terms.



David Lange met the Brethren from time to time and, in the  
current Clark administration, Margaret Wilson, Trevor Mallard  
and Phil Goff have all met them to discuss various issues.

That's why, as we sit down on a Saturday morning to take  
over some of the unanswered questions, the Brethren business-  
men continue to go to great lengths to spell out that they're  
not speaking to *Investigate* on behalf of the Exclusive Brethren  
church, but as the seven men who organized and paid for  
the pamphlet drop: Greg Mason, Neville Simmons, Andrew  
Simmons, Phil Win, Doug Watt, Tim Lough and Andy Smith.  
It was this action, they say, that brought about the publicity.  
"The cross, they say, is theirs to bear, not their church's."

To say their comments are official Brethren policy, they  
argue, is like suggesting *Investigate* is the mouthpiece of the  
Anglican Church, simply because its editor is an Anglican.

Point taken.

Other media have repeatedly tackled stories about the griev-  
ances of ex-members of the Brethren and those issues have  
already been well-canvassed elsewhere, although for the sake of  
completeness we did ask. But our main focus was on the group's  
involvement in the political process and whether it was part  
of a wider push by the Exclusive Brethren church worldwide.  
Given that members of the group of seven are on record as being  
unaware of the hiring of private detectives, there's also the issue  
of whether investigating the Prime Minister is defensible.

But I begin by addressing perhaps the biggest issue of all:

why they don't vote, and in turn whether that negates their right as citizens to be involved in the political process:

**Q:** The original catch-cry of democracy was "no taxation without representation". Yet the current tone of the debate suggests you have no right to an opinion because you don't vote. To what extent do you think the decision not to cast votes is being misinterpreted by the media and politicians?

**A:** As Brethren we respect government as "of God". Persons in government are drawn from the world, but government itself 'per se' is of God. The basis of our refraining from voting is that, due to our conscience before God, government being of God, we don't vote for any particular party. But if political parties act contrary to our conscience we reserve the unequivocal right to make representation to government, irrespective of their party position, to represent our views. We believe that it is our respon-

sibility according to the Scriptures to testify to Government in order to uphold right principles and to foster policies that will bring greater prosperity for all New Zealanders.

The apostle St. Paul represented his views to government for an extensive period of time starting in Rome (in which time he was prisoner of the Roman Empire) and as a result of this stand St. Paul was martyred. (2Tim 4 v17 ...and that all the Gentiles might hear...).

Obviously it is difficult for people to understand that our religious beliefs preclude us from voting but as law-abiding citizens who pay taxes we feel we have every right to express our views on Government policies and that is what we did in the last general election. Nearly 20 percent of registered voters chose not to vote in the last election; surely that does not preclude them from holding concerns and from time to time giving voice to those concerns.

**Q:** What is the theological reason that Brethren choose not to vote?

**A:** The Brethren believe Government is of God. Daniel 4 v 17 "...that the living may know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will...". The apostle Paul exhorts us to be subject to "... the powers that be are ordained of God" - Romans 13 v 1,2; and that "...supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." 1 Timothy 2 v 1,2 .

**Q:** To what extent do government policies on health, welfare, crime, social issues etc affect Brethren in New Zealand?

**A:** Brethren are contributing members of society and Government policies affect Brethren as much as other citizens.

Brethren society is characterized by strong family units, taking responsibility to care for their own through all age groups. Use of the social welfare system is therefore minimal and Brethren rarely go through the criminal justice system. We have been seeing Members of Parliament about our concerns for many years and concerned members of the Brethren Church have been making representation to Government for over 90 years.

**Q:** In what way is the church's tax status significantly different from that applying to the Anglican or Catholic churches, or for that matter to charities like the NZ Aids Foundation?

**A:** The tax status of the Exclusive Brethren Church is no different to any other New Zealand charity.

**Q:** What motivated you as a group of businessmen to become involved in politics?

**A:** We wanted to make a positive contribution to the politi-

"The Brethren Church has been part of New Zealand society for more than 150 years. Although Brethren have a life of their own and maintain a line of separation, they interact on a daily basis with citizens. Yes we liaise with Brethren from other countries; No we did not seek permission to become involved in the democratic process; nor would we need to or be required to in the future"

cal debate in New Zealand. We produced a document called "Suggested initiatives for prosperity in New Zealand" to this end. This document contains proposals which, when taken as a whole, we believe will create a force for economic and social good. There was no self-serving motive in producing this document. None of us would derive any special benefit from the initiatives proposed; rather we felt strongly that the policy initiatives we recommended would benefit the nation as a whole.

**Q:** The public perception, created by Labour, is that "the Exclusive Brethren church" is behind all of your activities...

**A:** The Exclusive Brethren Church was not behind our activities and the fact that the Government and the media have portrayed our actions as the actions of the Church has caused members of our Church a great deal of anxiety and hurt. We believe it is unparalleled in the history of New Zealand politics, that the religious faith of individuals or groups who chose to become involved has been the subject of such intense scrutiny and vilification. We acted as a group of businessmen; not as spokespersons for the Church. Members of our Church community are free to choose if they become involved; no different to any other citizens.

**Q:** Some have suggested that all Brethren families in NZ have had to contribute towards the costs of some of the activities of the past couple of years, others say it is being funded by yourselves, how in fact has it been done?

**A:** We can give a categorical assurance that the suggestion of all Brethren families contributing towards the cost of our activities is completely untrue. We funded the activities ourselves from our own resources and accepted help from others who had similar views (a number of these were not members of the Brethren). No collections from congregations were ever held.

**Q:** Leaving aside the political heat and spin generated by Phil Win's decision to hire private investigators to get to the bottom of some of the allegations swirling around, some conservative blog sites have made the point that the former police officers were only doing what investigative journalists should have been

doing. Now that you've had a chance to breathe, on reflection what are your thoughts both about the hiring of the PIs and the way it has been reported?

**A:** The decision by an individual to engage a P.I. was to substantiate or refute allegations of wrong use of office, misappropriation of public funds, and untruths. Engaging a P.I. is a totally legal method by which to establish the truth.

**Q:** For the record, have you ever passed information to *Investigate* magazine?

**A:** No never, nor have we any association with the magazine.

**Q:** Are you aware of any information gathered by the PIs that has been passed to any daily media?

**A:** No.

**Q:** The Government has introduced a raft of laws over the years that impact on the personal privacy of citizens. They have repeatedly used the line that people who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear. How does that accord do you think with the Government's reaction to having its own activities scrutinized by former police detectives acting within the law?

**A:** No one is above the law.

**Q:** Left wing sites are making much of the fact that Exclusive Brethren members in Australia and the US have sought to have input into the political process there as well. Is there a "conspiracy" at play, or is this reflecting a move by the church to allow local leaders to engage more in their local communities than perhaps has been common in the past?

**A:** There is no conspiracy. We did not seek permission from the Church to become involved in the general election campaign. We chose to become involved as a small group of concerned citizens. The Brethren Church has been part of New Zealand society for more than 150 years. Although Brethren have a life of their own and maintain a line of separation, they interact on a daily basis with citizens. Yes we liaise with Brethren from other countries; No we did not seek permission to become involved in the democratic process; nor would we need to or be required to in the future.

**Q:** The Brethren have been criticized on talk radio not so much for their opinions but the fact that no mention was made of your "Brethrenness". The issue to me seems slightly more complex in that there are many Catholics, Presbyterians and atheists who lobby without disclosing their religious beliefs. Additionally, there is this fascinating quote from AIDS activist Warren Lindberg on the backstairs lobbying gay activists have carried out: "NZAF was certain that a repeat of the public debate over homosexuality carried out in 1985-86 by independent groups of activists with differing political agendas would produce an American-style backlash in New Zealand. Consequently the campaign was not won by street marches and public meetings, but by carefully back-stairs lobbying and media management." (your emphasis) In what way if any do you think the Exclusive Brethren are being unfairly singled out by the media?

**A:** We believe our Church and the members of our Church have been unfairly targeted by the Government and the media. We do not believe our religious faith needed to be disclosed because we were not acting on behalf of the Brethren Church. We were and are a small group of businessmen who chose to make their views known. All the pamphlets distributed carried bona-fide authorizations, which were cleared by Police enquiry.

**Q:** On reflection, regardless of what others have done it

terms of background lobbying, what if anything about the election campaign pamphlets would you have done differently given a second chance?

**A:** We do not believe we did "background lobbying". We openly met with Members of Parliament from all political parties over a two year period prior to the last election and that includes Labour Government ministers. We stated who we were, why we were involved and the issues we wanted to discuss. We enjoyed open and lively political debate on a wide range of economic and social issues with Members of Parliament. We were open about our religious faith but at no stage did we purport to be speaking on behalf of the Brethren Church.

If we were given a second chance to run the pamphlet campaign again, we would have registered an office for the campaign with an authorizing person and not used residential addresses (we were guided by the Chief Electoral Officer in this regard) because the individuals at some of those addresses were forced to flee their homes.

**Q:** Sources close to Helen Clark are speculating that the money being spent by you in fact originated overseas. To what extent if any is this true, and can you indicate how much in fact has been spent and how many of you are having to shoulder that burden?

**A:** We spent our own money and not one cent came from the Brethren Church or originated overseas. The less than \$1M we spent on the campaign is no different to the money spent by business, trade unions or single issue groups in the course of political campaigning. While it is accepted that businesses or trade unions can contribute to political campaigns, it is painted as clandestine when we chose to do the same thing.

**Q:** Have any journalists or politicians who have attacked you declared their own religious beliefs to you or publicly? To what extent do you think the undeclared religious views (and atheism is a religious view) held by members of the media and parliament have played a part in the way you have been treated?

**A:** We cannot comment on others' religious beliefs or motivation, however, we are members of a Christian faith, and for those politicians who do not believe in Christianity, this makes it easier to attack those who live by their faith in God.

**Q:** Some former members of the Exclusive Brethren have been critical of the church in the media. Are their criticisms valid or sour grapes, or a mixture of both? Are there, again, things that perhaps the church could have done differently?

**A:** Our Church community is made of members who share the same religious beliefs. Those who have left the Church community are free to speak and air their views of the Church.

**Q:** Did National lose the last election because the Exclusive Brethren became involved, or did they lose the election because the media didn't challenge the Prime Minister's vilification of the Brethren at the time, thus building this image of shadowy influence (while ignoring Rainbow Labour and the unions)?

**A:** You will have to ask the political analysts and commentators to answer that question. We simply campaigned for what we believed were policies in the best interests of New Zealand. If, however, our efforts were so ineffective, why has the reaction been so strident?

**Q:** In what way, if any, do you see historic parallels in the way Members of Parliament have attempted to marginalize a minority group in the eyes of society?

**A:** History is rich with examples of authoritarian states mar-

ginalizing and vilifying religious mi-

examples are attempts to get rid of those mis-

gether. (Closer to home, Georgina Beyer said in Parliament

23) we should be "dragged off to Australia"). Attempts are being made to remove our right to speak, restrict our ability to earn a living, question the right of our schools to operate, deny us permission for places of worship, hold up our women as objects of ridicule and denigrate our charitable works. Perhaps we could pose the question: if members of the Muslim faith had been vilified by the Government, in the way that members of our Church have been, what would have been the consequence?

History teaches us that one of the fundamental tenets of democracy is the protection of minority rights from the power of the state. That includes the freedom for minority groups to engage in political activity. When there is no respect for those rights, minorities suffer as a consequence. The hallmark of authoritarianism is a complete disregard for the minorities' rights to freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly.

**Q:** If you could explain to the people of New Zealand why you are doing all this, what would you say?

**A:** We are law-abiding citizens who chose to live our lives, according to the Holy Scriptures, within our religious community that has been part of New Zealand society for more than 150 years. That does not mean that we don't live and work in the wider community. We employ New Zealanders, pay our taxes and make a productive contribution to our country.

We strongly believe that we have a contribution to make to the fabric of our country. We want to see New Zealand prosper. We believe, as a nation, we can do a lot better in terms of our economic performance, social policies, international standing and the protection of Christian values.

**UPDATE:** As this issue was going to press, news broke of claims that children had been sexually abused inside the Exclusive Brethren community up until nine years ago, apparently by older children, and the issue had been "covered up". We put the fresh allegations to the businessmen to see if they had any comment:

1. Are you aware of any incidents of child sexual abuse that have not been reported to the police but were instead handled internally by the Church?

2. Are you aware of historic cases of child sexual abuse by other Church members in the past?

3. [Ex-Brethren witness] Philippa has given the names of seven men to the police. As the only identifiable group of seven men in the Brethren in the public eye, can you please confirm for the record that none of you are involved in any way?

4. You've politely declined in the *Investigate* interview to respond to ex-members of the Church, saying they are free to talk to the media about their issues. Now that they have, do you wish to elaborate on your previous answer?

In a brief phone call with one of the men, he appeared genuinely surprised at the allegations and confirmed "there's absolutely no way" the members of the group of seven were involved in any way. As to the rest of our questions, he said he was unaware of any incidents. However, he said he could only speak from his own personal knowledge and that if information was being provided to the police general comment from church members might be inappropriate. **INVESTIGATE**