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National News



Vincent Field with his father, Stan.

Son caught in Exclusive Brethren tug-of-love

Saturday October 14, 2006
By Patrick Gower

As a boy in the Exclusive Brethren, Vincent Field thought his father was the devil's work.

His parents had been excommunicated by the sect, and Vincent was being held by his Exclusive Brethren grandparents in one of this country's highest-profile custody disputes, which went all the way to Parliament through National MP Nick Smith.

The 3-year dispute ended in 1993 when 12-year-old Vincent and his younger siblings were returned to parents Stan and Julia Field.

And today Vincent, 25, is best of mates with his father and as far as he can be from the Exclusive Brethren's beliefs.

Speaking publicly for the first time, Vincent said he was angry about the sect's attempts to influence politics in New Zealand and other countries.

"It pisses me off that they are still kicking people out and breaking up families," he told the Weekend Herald.

"I have experienced first hand what that is like, and it bloody hurts. It is the leaders who condone it, and it is the leaders who are getting into all this political stuff. It is the leaders I have something against."

The Field dispute began at Christmas 1989 when the Nelson-based parents were having marital problems that led to them being "withdrawn from" and leaving the children with grandparents Geoff and Letitia Hickmott in Rangiora while they sorted things out.

They never got back with the sect and didn't get the children back either.

They had to resort to the Family Court, and the case went on to the High Court, as well as being raised in Parliament by Mr Smith, who criticised the Exclusive Brethren and

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delays in the family court system.

Vincent said he could remember the night before the children were to be returned to their parents after a final failed appeal by the grandparents to keep them.

His grandfather received a telephone call from the church's leader, the "Elect Vessel" or "Man of God", Australian John Hales.

"Grandpa got off the phone and said: 'Beloved Mr Hales says we don't need to worry because the Lord is going to take care of them and they will have a car accident'.

"I was just forming this picture of my parents dying and Grandpa was saying 'don't worry', even though it was his own daughter. It was like, 'what the hell?'. We were supposed to take some consolation from it."

During the separation, he had been led to believe his parents were evil, that they were partying alcoholics, "that it would be all doom and gloom if we returned - that they were evil".

He remembers presents from his parents being left unopened.

Even on the day they were to be returned to their parents, Vincent said, a plan was hatched by his Exclusive Brethren family members to lock the children in a bathroom, then usher them out a window and across a neighbour's fence.

He can remember police officers being involved, then being reunited with his parents and thinking they were not so bad after all.

Vincent says the Exclusive Brethren hired a private investigator to spy on his parents "to get something on them to use in the [Family Court] case".

The Field family eventually fled to Perth, claiming continued harassment by the sect.

The marriage did not survive. Julia now lives in New Zealand with the other children, Roberta and Carlton.

Mr Smith and a member of the Exclusive Brethren reached an out-of-court settlement in a defamation suit.

The sect always argued the matter was between the children's parents and grandparents, and did not concern the sect itself.

Vincent said he had seen his grandfather only once or twice in the past 14 years, including after his grandmother's death, even though they were not allowed to go to her funeral.

Vincent is now learning the plastering trade from his father and has decided to give religion a miss.

He has got his "head right" after a few years of ups and downs but still gets tripped up, continuing to refer to John Hales as "Mr Hales", something he says is testimony to the "brainwashing" he endured.

"I'll tell people like my girlfriend or mates stuff that went on when I was a kid, and they barely believe it."

Vincent has never received an apology from the sect, and some bitter memories will not fade, such as that involving a drill he was given as a present by an Exclusive Brethren uncle during the separation.

"I loved that drill and I wrote to him when we were back with the parents asking him if he could send it to me. He wrote back and said it was only a present for you while you were in the fellowship of the Brethren. That's the Exclusive

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Brethren for you."

The Hickmott family declined to comment.

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