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# Behind the EXCLUSIVE BRETHREN

Extract from Behind the Exclusive Brethren

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Extract from Behind the Exclusive Brethren by Michael Bachelard published by Scribe RRP: \$32.95

*On 7 August 2007, the long era of John Howard, Australia's prime minister and the member for Bennelong, was drawing to its close. It was a Tuesday, and a very busy one for the man who was staring down the barrel of an election he was about to lose.*

*Just the night before, Howard's dramatic intervention in Aboriginal affairs in the Northern Territory had passed the Lower House. That morning, Newspoll had released another terrible set of numbers for Howard, and the Reserve Bank had decided to hike the official interest rate to a 10-year high of 6.5 per cent. Howard's policy to directly fund the Mersey hospital in Tasmania was beginning to unravel, as was his lavish WorkChoices advertising campaign.*

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*Yet, in the midst of this pre-election political frenzy, the prime minister found space in his schedule to meet up with some old friends. 'I was in Canberra and I greeted Mr Howard and enquired from him whether Mr Hales could meet him for a short discussion,' recalls the Exclusive Brethren's main man in Canberra, Warwick John.*

*Howard gave him the nod, and John immediately phoned the Sydney-based world leader of his sect, Bruce D. Hales, aka the 'Man of God,' the 'Elect Vessel,' 'Mr Bruce'. Hales donned his tie, collected his security guard, and went to the airport to board his private jet. Also aboard were his brother, millionaire pump-supplier Stephen Hales, and another Sydney pump salesman, Mark Mackenzie. The three Exclusive Brethren elders and political lobbyists flew to Canberra where, that same afternoon, they were signed through security, probably by Stephen Hales using his special parliamentary pass, and they walked into Howard's office for a meeting.*

*The Exclusive Brethren is a conservative Christian sect whose members do not vote. Even if they did, these votes would have little impact. The church has just 15,000 members in Australia, and about 43,000 worldwide – a number that would be dwarfed by the crowd on a quiet day at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. (Trade unions, which Howard declared irrelevant, have 1.8 million members in Australia.)*

*'There was no agenda for the meeting and nothing critical was discussed, only economic matters in general,' Warwick John explained. 'Mr Howard is always interested in how small business is faring, and there was a brief discussion about TV shows concerning the Brethren. Mr Howard did not approve of the public vilification of the Brethren as a Christian church.' There was 'general talk regarding interest rates', and the Brethren also confirmed that they were praying for Howard.*

*What they really talked about will probably never be known. But burning questions remained: who is this sect, and how did it come about that they had such a close relationship, such an open door, to the most powerful man in the country?*

*Before 2005, very little was known in Australia about the Exclusive Brethren. During that year, Greens politicians on both sides of the Tasman uncovered some unusual activity surrounding the election campaigns of Howard in 2004 and the National Party's Don Brash in New Zealand in 2005.*

*Investigations by politicians and journalists into those campaigns revealed the hidden hand of a tiny, well-heeled religious group whose members dressed conservatively, and spoke politely and persistently to politicians – but who, behind the locked gates of their assembly halls, preached a radical doctrine of separation from the world. They also discovered how close to the boundaries of legality the Brethren had been prepared to walk in order to mask*

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*their involvement in these campaigns.*

*These investigations uncovered the fact that the Brethren's leader, Bruce D. Hales, made soothing comments in public that they were 'committed to being decent, law abiding and contributing citizens of Australia' but, behind closed doors, told his flock, 'We have to get a hatred, an utter hatred of the world'. It emerged that the Brethren's lobbying of politicians had been decades-long, and very successful – they had carved out a number of exemptions for themselves from the laws that govern others, by making special requests on the grounds of religious conscience. Also emerging was a hidden community of former sect members, damaged and devastated by the loss of their families to a group that they insisted was an oppressive cult.*

*My first interest in this group emerged from an innocent-enough question from my editor in September 2006: would the Exclusive Brethren be participating in the Victorian state election? The answer, I quickly discovered, was 'Yes'. My initial story in Melbourne's The Age prompted a blizzard of correspondence from people desperate to tell their personal stories of heartbreak and hardship at the hands of the religion they had grown up in. It led to many more questions, and answers.*

*Since then, I have met dozens of ex-Brethren members. Most have been highly intelligent and articulate people. Since leaving the Brethren, some say they have found God for the first time, and some have lost Him forever, but all of them still struggle with the psychological scars left by their Brethren upbringing.*

*Their experience is summed up well by Tim Twinam, a former English Brethren member now living in the United States, who set up a website, peeps.net, to act as a clearing house for ex-Brethren stories: 'One of the side effects of a cult is that they suck you out of you and replace you with a template. And these empty people come in, they're angry and they don't even know why, and gradually they find themselves. It's not a religious concept, it's a psychological one.' I hope this book adequately conveys to the world what these people have been trying to tell us.*

*I have also met a number of current Brethren members, who are equally intelligent and articulate, but who are very careful about what they say. This book is not intended to vilify any of these individuals nor, in fact, the sect in general; it is, rather, an attempt to dig out the truth.*

*It's important to note that scrutiny is not vilification. The Exclusive Brethren will not see it that way, of course, but every religious or cultural group that plays a part in national life should accept that who they are and what they do is a legitimate topic of discussion in the public domain. This is particularly true of a group that, without voting, and without being candid about itself, seeks constantly to influence the political process.*

*Changes are afoot in the Exclusive Brethren under Hales. Some of these changes seem to move in the direction of greater personal freedom for his followers. But others, such as setting up a comprehensive Brethren school system, move decisively in the opposite direction.*

*This book is intended to inform the public about these issues, to expose what has remained hidden about this sect, and something of its history and background. It is also intended to forewarn those in political life about the background of those respectful, conservatively dressed men who knock at their doors seeking special exemptions and privileges.*

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