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Government accuses Brethren of lying

By DAN EATON - The Press | Thursday, 19 April 2007

The Government has lashed out at the Australia-based Exclusive Brethren church, accusing it of lying about its involvement in trying to sway the results of elections in New Zealand.

The Labour Party yesterday also challenged assertions by the sect that its politically active members in New Zealand were operating independently from the broader church which has its headquarters across the Tasman.

But Prime Minister Helen Clark is understood to be pleased the group has become more vocal, seeing its comments – including telling The Press it may set up an independent political wing – as boosting the case for campaign funding reforms.

A Brethren spokesman from Queensland, Tony McCorkell, arrived in Auckland on Tuesday saying the sect wanted to distance itself from the New Zealand members involved in a row with the Government.

He said the church had no involvement and he would encourage the men to form an independent wing to carry out their activities, which include plans to campaign against the Government during next year's election.

"It is just extraordinary really," a spokesman for Clark said yesterday.

Justice Minister Mark Burton said efforts by the church to distance itself from the covert activities of New Zealand members "do not stack up".

At the last election, seven Brethren businessmen, several of them senior members of the church in New Zealand, were responsible for spending more than \$1 million on pamphlets deriding the Government and its allies.

Last week they struck out at Government plans to cap spending on third-party campaigning.

Burton said Kiwis should take the most recent statements by the Brethren "with more than a few grains of salt".

"On the one hand they're arguing that they didn't know what New Zealand members were doing, yet on the other hand they're supporting attacks by local members on proposed reform of electoral finance rules.

"New Zealanders should be wary of these attempts to set the groundwork for more covert action in the lead-up to the 2008 election."

Burton said the Government's planned changes to electoral funding rules aimed to create a fair, transparent and open system which would fully expose party funding and support.

"It is vital that all New Zealanders know who is involved in our politics and have a fair opportunity to participate in the democratic process."

Labour Party president Mike Williams yesterday said the Australian Brethren leadership was not telling the truth about involvement here.

He said that in 2005 election telephone canvassing and polling was carried out from schools owned by the Brethren, in some cases by pupils.

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