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MPs told bill would not stop Brethren campaigns

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Election reform legislation would not stop the Exclusive Brethren's "secret seven" spending hundreds of thousands of dollars campaigning against the Government, a committee of MPs has been told.

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Parliament's justice and electoral select committee is considering the Government's Electoral Finance Bill which is designed to stop covert campaigns like that waged at the last election by seven wealthy Exclusive Brethren businessmen.

However its wide definitions of third parties and advertising have been criticised by social agencies, churches, unions and business groups, which say the bill would limit their existing advocacy activities.

Prominent blogger and former National Party staffer David Farrar today told MPs the bill would fail to stop groups like the Exclusive Brethren's so-called "secret seven" spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a political campaign.

They would be able to do this by each registering as a third party and then spending \$60,000 each – amounting to \$420,000.

Individuals, if they chose, could also sign up 500 people, register as a political party, then spend up to \$1 million even if they did not stand any candidates.

Farrar, who runs the right-leaning Kiwiblog weblog, said there was little evidence that elections could be successfully "bought" and third parties that wanted to campaign would always find loopholes.

He believed the bill should be withdrawn and any changes to the electoral finance laws should begin with wide public consultation to build a consensus before a bill was drafted.

If the committee decided the bill should proceed, they should recommend enforcement powers be taken away from the police and given to the Electoral Commission, he said.

The police failure to prosecute both Labour and National for Electoral Act breaches in 2005 had been "incompetent", he said.

Author Nicky Hager, whose book *The Hollow Men*, details many of the links between the Brethren campaign and National's leadership at the time, said law changes to crack down on third party campaigns were necessary.

"This is the growth area in dodgy election campaigning and everything that can be done to control it would be an investment in not having dodgy electioneering in the future."

He said he supported the extension of the campaign period and the \$60,000 cap on spending, but the bill needed amendments.

The most urgent change was lowering the cap on anonymous donations to political parties and banning the use of secret trusts used to anonymise donations.

"The main thing this bill will allow is continuing secret donations . . . and that is actually worse than the third party campaign, that's the dodgiest thing in the election finance regime in New Zealand and that will all continue."

He said the easiest way the committee could do this would be to recommend the introduction of a small amount of state funding in order to get cross-party support for the change.

There also needed to be a tightening of parties' declarations on how money is spent, he said.

Before the bill was introduced the Government failed to get sufficient political support to introduce greater state funding.

As a result it decided to leave the law around anonymous donations unchanged – parking the issue with a yet to be appointed panel, which will report on it some time after next year's election.

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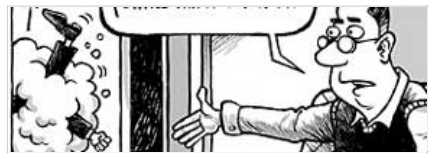
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