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Rudd knocks back pleas for inquiry into Brethren

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PRIME MINISTER Kevin Rudd has rejected the pleas of former members of the Exclusive Brethren for a broad-ranging inquiry into the sect, saying it would unreasonably interfere with members' rights to practise their faith freely and openly.

Last year Mr Rudd said the Brethren was an extremist cult whose activities broke up families. In the days leading up to the election in November, he called on four federal agencies - the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Taxation Office, the Australian Electoral Commission, and the anti-money-laundering agency Austrac - to investigate the Brethren's activities.

Former members seized on the comments and wrote to Mr Rudd in February, asking for an inquiry, particularly into "disproportionately high taxpayer funding of Brethren schools, dishonest political campaigning, their charitable status in relation to rate and tax exemptions, and their well-known intimidatory tactics during traumatic Family Court cases".

The letter was written by former Brethren member Peter Flinn and was signed by 33 others. Attached were 13 life stories outlining the misery inflicted by the sect, including a doctrine of separation, which prevents lapsed members from contacting their families.

Last week Mr Rudd's chief of staff, David Epstein, replied that the Prime Minister "does not resile from the views he expressed last year" and he "remains concerned about the reported imposition of doctrines that weaken family bonds" and "prevent children accessing online learning tools".

Mr Epstein urged anyone with details of criminal behaviour within the Brethren to bring them to police, but he said Mr Rudd, on grounds of religious freedom, would not institute an inquiry.

The move suggests the Government will vote against a motion by Greens senator Bob Brown calling for an inquiry into the sect and its tax concessions, public funding and practices that harm children or families.

Mr Brown said Mr Rudd's position was appalling and the "priority should be the welfare of children and families and the taxpayers' money that is going to this organisation".

Mr Flinn said the Exclusive Brethren could take no comfort from Mr Rudd's response.

"We just want to highlight other equally fundamental human rights, such as access to family who remain Brethren members, a right callously denied for decades," he said.

An Exclusive Brethren spokesman could not be contacted for comment.

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