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Electoral body to seek police probe into Brethren sect

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THE Exclusive Brethren sect faces a federal police investigation over its heavy advertising spending in favour of John Howard and the Liberal Party at the last federal election.

The Age believes that the Australian Electoral Commission will announce today it is referring to police questions over whether sect members have lied about their involvement in the campaign.

For 16 months the AEC has been investigating the source of funds used to pay for advertisements and leaflets in Mr Howard's electorate, Bennelong, and in South Australia and Tasmania, worth \$370,000, in the days leading up to the election.

All the advertisements were pro-Liberal, pro-John Howard, and anti-Greens.

At the centre of the investigation is a \$10 private company, Willmac Enterprises, which was set up just three weeks before election day by Sydney pump salesman Mark Mackenzie, a member of the reclusive sect.

The company's spending on leaflets, advertisements and direct mail put it in the top five biggest spenders among "third party" election campaigners.

Willmac spent 10 times the amount spent by Right to Life (\$30,555), more than doubled the spending of the Australian Conservation Foundation (\$127,099), and even out-spent the Wilderness Society (\$229,073). The company was quietly deregistered again 18 months later.

Some advertisements were authorised by Stephen Hales, the brother of the sect's world leader, "Elect Vessel", Bruce D. Hales. The address given was the brethren-run school in the Sydney suburb of Meadowbank.

But an initial report by the AEC, released in December, found that "there is no evidence that Willmac Enterprises received any gifts or donations from other sources that contributed to the costs of the advertisements and pamphlets".

Mr Mackenzie, and the Exclusive Brethren's leadership restated that position to *The Age*.

A spokesman for Mr Mackenzie said funds came from "business earnings, not donations, but from income generated through business activity".

An Exclusive Brethren spokesman, Tony McCorkell, said: "The church organisation is not a stakeholder in the entity Willmac, so I cannot see why it would be involved (in an investigation). There is clear evidence to demonstrate that Willmac made money from legitimate business earnings. With a federal election around the corner, the timing of this development could only be described as curious and rather astounding."

But *The Age* believes that further evidence has emerged that casts doubt on Willmac's disclosures. In the short time Willmac was in existence it paid for a pamphlet and advertisements in a range of Sydney and South Australian newspapers.

The Electoral Act requires "third party" donors to set out the details of "all gifts made ... that were used to fund the expenditure".

Australian Greens leader Bob Brown told *The Age* yesterday that "on the face of it," the advertisements were "devised by the Exclusive Brethren using their school as a base ... but paid for by Willmac, another brethren person's company". "You have to assume that this was nowhere near as honest as you'd expect and that it manipulated the process to escape the fact that the Exclusive Brethren were campaigning for John Howard."

Mr McCorkell said last month that there were no formal plans to campaign for Mr Howard in Bennelong at the next federal election, "but no one is ruling it out".

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