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Kevin Rudd allows secret talks with 'cult'

Sean Parnell, FOI editor | October 29, 2008

KEVIN Rudd appears to have made peace with the Exclusive Brethren, whom he publicly derided as an "extremist cult" in his run to The Lodge, by allowing for secret talks between church and government representatives.

In the lead-up to the election campaign, the Exclusive Brethren actively lobbied then prime minister John Howard but was given short shrift by Mr Rudd.

The Labor leader publicly attacked the church, labelling it an extremist cult that "breaks up families".

The ALP called on four federal agencies to investigate its activities and went to great lengths to avoid contact with the church.

The Exclusive Brethren, which two years ago hired PR firm Jackson Wells Morris to help counter bad press, still wanted a relationship with the new government and in March made representations to Mr Rudd's then chief of staff, David Epstein.

In a letter obtained by The Australian using Freedom of Information laws, a senior church member complained to Mr Epstein about continuing "ill-informed comment" by the media and disaffected church members about the Exclusive Brethren.

"This has led, amongst other things, to the church being falsely labelled as 'shadowy' and 'secretive'," the letter states.

"Given this situation, and statements made last year by Mr Rudd that in his view we are 'an extremist cult', we understand that Labor Party ministers feel they cannot meet with us because of the political ramifications of doing so. This disappoints us a great deal but, as I say, we understand it.

"It is a sad outcome that these criticisms have led to our church being effectively cut off from meaningful representation at the political level."

The name of the author was deleted.

The letter, which requested a meeting with a government representative, was delivered with a 14-page briefing note from church leader Bruce Hales.

Exclusive Brethren spokesman Daniel Hales yesterday confirmed Mr Epstein had replied in terms that were satisfactory to the church.

It is understood Mr Epstein suggested the Sydney-based Exclusive Brethren leaders meet their local member, parliamentary secretary Maxine McKew.

Neither the Prime Minister's office nor the church would release Mr Epstein's response.

"This was a private letter between the church and the Prime Minister's office," Daniel Hales said in a brief statement.

Ms McKew, a staunch Catholic and former journalist, has refused to speak to The Australian about the Exclusive Brethren and any meetings that may have taken place.

In May, Mr Rudd, an Anglican, made it clear he would not support a parliamentary inquiry into the Exclusive Brethren, believing it would interfere with people's rights to religious freedom.

In September, a parliamentary committee took the unusual step of allowing the Exclusive Brethren to respond to the Greens' attacks on their activities, incorporating the church's response into Hansard.

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