

# Sect attempted secret donations to Howard

- **Michael Bachelard**
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Members of the Exclusive Brethren attempted to donate to John Howard's re-election campaign last year in a way that meant the cash injection would never have been disclosed to the public.

A senior Liberal Party source has confirmed in a new book about the secretive Christian sect that, in the weeks leading up to the November election, he was approached by a group of Exclusive Brethren men in a city hotel building who offered him a large, anonymous financial donation.

"They said, 'We are a private group.' I asked them if they voted - it was a testing question. They said they didn't.

"It was a very short discussion," the source said.

The Exclusive Brethren are exempt from voting. But for many years they have extensively lobbied politicians, and, in the 2004 federal election campaign, pumped \$370,000 into a pro-Howard, anti-Greens advertising effort without fully disclosing who they were.

"We're in the business of ideas, and so are the Exclusive Brethren," the Liberal source said. "I regard many of the party's views and those of the Exclusive Brethren as inconsistent. What the (Liberal) party stands for should not be confused in the mind of the electorate by the acceptance of donations from fringe groups."

The source turned down the offer, saying: "In my view, if you accept this money, you're arguably accepting some of their opinions."

In fact, by late 2007, according to Liberal pollster Mark Textor, the sect was electorally "radioactive".

The Liberal source said the Brethren men had made it clear to him that they could use the Howard government's lax electoral disclosure laws to provide cash donations from a large number of individuals, each of which would come in beneath the electoral disclosure limit of \$10,500.

For example, 100 Brethren people could have been moved "individually" to donate \$10,499 each, for a total donation of \$1.049 million, without publicly reporting it. It is unclear whether any such donations were actually made.

Brethren spokesman Daniel Hales, the brother of Brethren leader, "Man of God" Bruce D. Hales, said that "any decision by individual church members to donate money to a political party is a private matter and not directed or co-ordinated by the church ... the church has no knowledge of a co-ordinated effort amongst its members to donate money to the Liberal Party in 2007".

The Brethren had met numerous times with Mr Howard and the "Christian men" in his government over many years and, in meetings and correspondence with Mr Howard, they offered him their "undeviating prayerful support".

Mr Howard had met a four-man church delegation, including its leader Hales, as late as August last year, three months before the election, though a Brethren spokesman, Warwick John, said "no commitments or promises as to campaign support were discussed or agreed upon." Liberal Party operatives say the Exclusive Brethren used their relationship with Mr Howard, which dated from the 1970s, to try to influence other party officials to deal sympathetically with them.

Mr Textor said that, "from a campaign perspective, the things they did on behalf of conservative parties often sounded so shrill in tone that they were not particularly effective," and their attitudes "did not reflect in any time the sort of aspirations and views we ever picked up (in polling), nor what was acceptable as part of the political discourse".

Michael Bachelard is the author of *Behind The Exclusive Brethren*.

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