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COMMENT

Book Review: Behind the Exclusive Brethren

By Craig Young

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The Exclusive Brethren need no introduction to our readers, or those in Australia, given their long-standing record of political interference on behalf of social conservative causes. However, Melbourne Age reporter Michael Bachelard has written a comprehensive reference work on the sect, just in time for our latest general election.

Bachelard begins his tale of religion, politics and skulduggery with the rather profane and coarse statements of the Elect Vessel John Taylor Junior, a belligerent alcoholic, when he attended the sect's conference in Aberdeen back in 1970. The Exclusive Brethren had undergone a series of schisms since John Darby, a former Anglican fundamentalist minister, founded the sect in 1827.

Taylor's alcoholism led to bizarre cult-like regulations that prevented sect members from even eating with outsiders, and restricted social contact with them as well. His language and behaviour scandalised his followers in Aberdeen, more so when a Mrs. Madeline Ker, several decades his junior, was found naked and lying on his bed, alongside an inebriated and half-naked Taylor Junior. There ensued an unholy power struggle between Taylor and his detractors, all but destroying the sect in England and the United States.

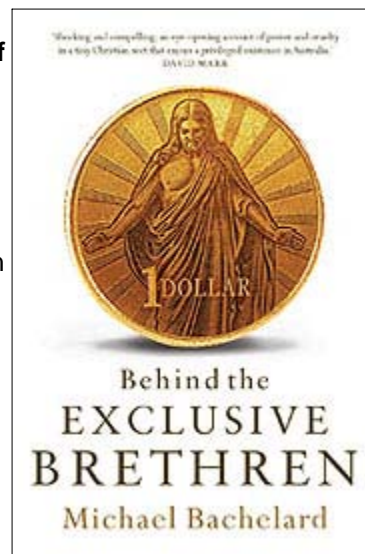
Three months after these unseemly events, Taylor died of alcohol-related causes. Half a world away, Australian and New Zealand sect members were oblivious to the events that had unfolded, and became the effective power centre of sect leadership.

After detailing the events that led to this Australian ascendancy, Bachelard turns back to the nineteenth century, and the foundation of the sect by the aforementioned former fundamentalist Anglican minister John Darby. As with many fundamentalist sects, the Exclusive Brethren believe that before the Second Coming of Christ, they will be 'raptured' into heaven alongside other fundamentalists. Again, like many other fundamentalist sects, the Exclusive Brethren believe in strict 'moral' conduct and strong sectarian hierarchy. In 1845, the sect experienced its first split, when Darby excommunicated co-founder Benjamin Newton and his followers, who went on to found the Open Brethren, while Darby and his followers created the initial Exclusive Brethren. However, there were subsequent ructions in 1879, 1883, 1885 and 1890, sometimes over arcane matters of theology, but more often related to internal power struggles.

After Darby died in 1882, these schisms proliferated, until James Taylor Senior took control of the sect in 1910. He imposed stricter standards of institutional discipline, and centralised authority around his own person, based in New York. In 1919, Taylor became an entrepreneur, inaugurating a pattern of small business development that has proliferated within the boundaries of the sect. Taylor Senior was also responsible for the concept of 'new light', which meant that Exclusive Brethren were supposed to treat 'revelations' from the sect leader as 'continuing revelation' of the Will of God. In 1953, he died, and there were several years of political vacuum until his alcoholic son took over.

In 1960, Taylor Junior ruled that sect members couldn't eat alongside 'non-believers'...and nor could they remain married to them. This edict has caused terrible suffering to 'mixed' marriages, parents and children whenever the leadership decides to excommunicate one family member, while encouraging their former partner and children to shun them. Taylor Junior also banned male shorts, facial hair and attendance at university and mandated small businesses and white matrimonial wear. What is even more tragic to relate is that Taylor Junior may have been a pedophile, given rape allegations from one former Exclusive Brethren member Alan Robertson, who has lived with his alleged trauma from events in Kilmarnock, Scotland, since he was eleven, in 1970.

James Symington, another alcoholic, succeeded Taylor Junior, and the sect rules expanded to encompass prohibition of faxes, mobile phones and even electronic garage door openers, in 1982. He dumbed down the sect



Michael Bachelard's Behind the Exclusive Brethren. Melbourne, Scribe, 2008.

even further, leading to Exclusive Brethren education ceasing at the age of sixteen, without tertiary entry qualifications available. In 1987, Australian John Hales succeeded as leader of the sect, which reflected the internal power shift to Australia. Under Hales, the Exclusive Brethren became more entrepreneurial, and built their own schools. In 2002, Bruce Hales succeeded his father, and in 2004, he sanctioned overt political intervention for the first time in the history of his sect.

What attracted former Australian Prime Minister John Howard and his Liberal Party to the sect? Bachelard argues that Howard's own small business origins and social conservatism led to empathy between the party and sect, although this seems ironic, given the sect's recent role in prompting family disintegration and acrimonious marital disputes. Exclusive Brethren secrecy can result in trauma for the victims of custody disputes and forced the Exclusive Brethren to fund loyal spouses expenses in such legal contexts. As is obvious from the alcoholism of Taylor Junior and Symington, alcoholism seems rife within Exclusive Brethren communities, and sometimes, children can begin drinking as young as fourteen within their homes.

However, Bruce Hales has relaxed minor restrictions, such as male short wearing and cell phone usage, although continued anti-university restrictions have left their communities without their own internal lawyers and doctors, and they are forced to accept consultancy fees from sympathetic outsiders. As for Exclusive Brethren women, they are expected to be married by the time that they turn twenty four. All external media and literature is still banned within their communities, although the same doesn't apply to receipt of government benefits, or exemption from industrial relations and school curriculum regulations. To avoid taxation, the Exclusive Brethren often form family trusts so that they can show up in lower tax brackets than might otherwise be the case, and divert money into their own sect enterprises, toward other family members, schools or political involvement.

Sometimes, this hermetic status can bring tragedy. In one horrific case in Albury, New South Wales, a mother couldn't cope after her ex-Exclusive Brethren husband realised that he was gay, and left his family. She had a nervous breakdown, and entrusted care of her daughters to one Lindsay Jensen, another sect member. Unknown to her, Jensen was also a pedophile, and raped both of her daughters. Although the sect vainly tried to conceal it, and harangue the girls into silence, Jensen was exposed to the Department of Community Affairs and sentenced to prison. Meanwhile, during the trial, another Exclusive Brethren member, Bruce Suggate, threatened terrorism against the court.

In 2004, Bruce Hales authorised overt interference in Australian state and federal politics, as well as that in neighbouring New Zealand. While the sect had previously disavowed overt involvement, it had covertly lobbied for exemption from industrial relations and educational regulations, on the spurious basis of 'religious freedom.' However, most of their current lobbying is against abortion, stem cell research, same sex marriage and civil unions. They also supported Howard's anti-union "WorkChoices" legislation, as well as other federal Liberal anti-union legislation, and fundamentalist federal/state Liberal/National Coalition MPs engineered lobbyist passes for the sect, as well as fundamentalist Christian Democratic MLC Fred Nile in New South Wales.

The Australian federal election of 2004 marked their first overt entry into Australian politics, in which a shell company, Willimac Enterprises, was established in New South Wales to funnel \$A370, 461 toward the Liberals, although much assistance was rendered by Warrick John, a prominent sect member, who wasn't involved in operational management of the shell company in question. In 2004, Bennelong Greens candidate Andrew Wilkie was harassed by sect members at public meetings, due to his opposition to Australian involvement in the Iraqi War and Howard 'anti-terrorism' legislation.

New South Wales National candidate Robert Griffith was a vehement opponent of same-sex marriage, and the Exclusive Brethren didn't like sitting Independent MP Peter Andren for his opposition to the Iraqi War, Howard administration attacks on asylum seekers, and supported electoral finance reform. However, this time, he was exposed, and Andren retained his federal seat.

In the past, the Exclusive Brethren have tried to rely on minimal disclosure of their activities. We now know that they established a front group, the Thanksgiving 2004 Committee, to support George W Bush during his second presidential campaign in that year, as well as fundraising for Mel Martinez, a Republican anti-abortion candidate opposed to same sex marriage. In 2005, their "Concerned Canadian Parents" front group lobbied against same-sex marriage in Canada- as well as civil unions in New Zealand.

As Nicky Hager has noted in his *Hollow Men* (2006), the Exclusive Brethren's opposition to civil unions blossomed into a covert advertising campaign against nuclear powered vessels in April 2005, and thereafter, former National leader Don Brash worked closely alongside them, accepting financial assistance and logistic aid, until the exposure of the Brethren's 'secret seven' cabal of businessmen and involvement in

anti-Green/anti-Labour pamphleteering. It led to National's narrow election loss in 2005, and in 2006, Brash resigned as party leader after several months of controversy. Even worse for the Exclusive Brethren, the New Zealand Greens contacted Australian Green leader Bob Brown during the campaign. His fellow Tasmanian Green Senator, Christine Milne, recognised the pamphlets from an anonymous anti-Green pamphleteering campaign in her own state.

Even after exposure, the Exclusive Brethren continued to liaise with the Liberal Party, trying vainly to interfere with Tasmanian state elections in 2006, lobbying John Howard and paying private investigators to engage in a smear campaign against Peter Davis, Helen Clark's husband, in New Zealand in 2007. As controversy grew, the Australian Electoral Commission and Australian Federal Police began to investigate the sect, and New Zealand passed our own Electoral Finance Act, in order to insure there was no repetition of the events of 2005.

Ironically enough, they have been harshly criticised by conservative public relations consultancy Crosby/Textor, co-belligerents in assisting the Liberal Party to its string of federal election victories. He reprimanded them for counter-productive interference that sounded cranky, shrill and personalised.

Since the events of 2005, however, there has been an upsurge in activism against the Exclusive Brethren's political ambitions and marital and family damage, from the forthright Peebs.Net website. The sect has tried to use copyright violation charges to shut Peebs.Net down, which is odd, given that 'fair use' has always provided a defence against this charge. However, some legal theorists suggest that this is a SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation), engineered to close down opposition to the sect. Academic and media critics of the sect have also found themselves on the receiving end of spurious 'defamation' charges for similar reasons. Indeed, while reporting on the sect, Bachelard himself was threatened. In 2007, the sect hired Jackson Wells Morris, a public relations and media consultancy firm, to provide them with media coaching and public relations assistance.

Several questions occur to me at the end of this most incisive book. Will there be a second Brethrenagate if New Zealand or Australian Exclusive Brethren fear that Labour might win our oncoming general election? What about opposition to our Electoral Finance Act- can we be sure that the Exclusive Brethren wasn't involved in support activities related to opposition to that legislation? And can we really be sure that the New Zealand centre-right has ended its involvement with this sect after all? Only the forthcoming weeks will tell.

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