



Sunday September 11, 2005

[Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Motoring](#) | [Ad Listings](#) | [Supplements](#) | [Watch](#) | [Adv](#)

Election 2005

News

- National News
 - [Headlines](#)
- [World News](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Technology & Science](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Money](#)
- [Motoring](#)
- [Property](#)
- [Employment](#)
- [Weather](#)



Exclusive Brethren businessmen (from left) Phil Winn, Greg Mason, Neville Simmons, Andrew Simmons, Doug Watt, Tim Lough and Andy Smith. Picture / Glenn Jeffrey

Brethren deny a hidden agenda

10.09.05

By Geoff Cumming and Errol Kiong

They are friends and businessmen very alarmed at the "deterioration" of the country, and they also happen to be Exclusive Brethren.

Some have known each other since childhood - this is, after all, a church you are born into.

The secretive seven were thrust into the limelight this week by their \$500,000 Change the Government leaflet campaign condemning Labour and the Greens.

Their sole aim was to promote and protect New Zealand on a sensible economic basis, they told a press conference on Wednesday.

They were concerned about "people suffering and dying on waiting lists" and the Greens' proposed capital gains tax, which would ensnare family homes sold for more than \$500,000.

But apart from the tightly controlled half-hour press conference, the seven seem determined to keep their anonymity.

Invitations to expand on their motives for the so-called smear campaign have been politely rebuffed. Nor are the people who are advising voters which way to jump willing to reveal much about themselves.

They appear to be successful, entrepreneurial types - in keeping with their church's philosophy of hard work and

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Event

- [Election 2005](#)

Organisations

- [Exclusive Brethren](#)
- [NZ Green party](#)
- [NZ National party](#)
- [NZ Labour party](#)

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- [Government](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Religion & Beliefs](#)

Location

- [New Zealand](#)

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- [Ritual humiliation and other tests of leadership »](#)
- [Government's style comes from the top »](#)
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- [Problems with parties holding hands »](#)
- [Brethren distributes two more pamphlets »](#)



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- [Health & Fitness](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Games](#)
- [Sudoku](#)
- [Crosswords](#)
- [Horoscopes](#)
- [Ringtones & txt](#)

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self-reliance.

Andy Smith runs a Hawkes Bay farm machinery business. He authorised the Wake Up New Zealand campaign in April, in which the church took out half-page adverts in major newspapers.

Tim Lough runs a Petone concrete products business.

Neville and Andrew Simmons are involved in an office furniture and equipment supplier based in Mangere. Andrew has other business interests, according to his brother.

The business activities of Doug Watt and Phil Winn are not known. Mr Winn's brother Myles authorised the Green Delusion leaflet.

Greg Mason, reported to be the New Zealand leader of Exclusive Brethren, is the managing director of Pump and Valve Specialties, which has premises in Otahuhu and Wanganui. He is also a director, with Andy Smith, of a firm called Strategic Information Services.

The company's name change, from Strategic Business Services, was registered with the Companies Office only on Tuesday.

It is not listed in the phone book or on the internet.

Mr Mason, like others of the seven, has a half share in an investment trust, in his case with wife, Josephine Barbara Mason. They live in a sprawling villa in leafy Epsom.

Mr Mason did not return Herald calls yesterday. Contacted on Thursday, Andrew Simmons told the Herald the group had "said everything we need to say right now".

More information would come to light in future pamphlets: "Hold your breath - they are excellent".

"We just want people to read the pamphlets."

The Simmons' firm, Aspect Interiors, supplies office partitioning, work stations and shelving. It employs women, as does Mason's Otahuhu firm. Both businesses are said to trade with Australian firms linked with Bruce Hales, the Exclusive Brethren's worldwide leader.

Neville Simmons yesterday said it was not appropriate to link his business to the campaign.

"We don't do business with each other. We operate in a commercial world with commercial disciplines."

Mr Simmons, who lives in a modest 1970s home in One Tree Hill, said there was "no selfish agenda" behind the campaign.

"It's really a concern for all New Zealanders."

He was critical of the Herald's coverage of the campaign - singling out award-winning political commentator John Armstrong as "not deserving of the term journalist".

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- Bay of Plenty
- Canterbury
- Central North Island
- Coromandel
- Eastland
- Hawke's Bay
- King Country
- Manawatu-Wanganui
- Marlborough
- Nelson Region
- Northland
- Otago
- Southland
- Taranaki
- Waikato
- Wairarapa
- Wellington Region

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- Subscription Services
- Back Issues
- Letters to the Editor
- Schools & Students
- Sponsorships
- Reader Panel
- Feedback
- FAQ / Site Help
- News via Email
- XML Newsfeeds
- News to a PDA
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- Competitions
- Photo Sales
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"He should concentrate on the facts - not trying to make fools out of people."

Last year, Mr Simmons was one of several church members who complained to the Broadcasting Standards Authority after a talkback tirade against Exclusive Brethren by Michael Laws on Radio Pacific.

The complaint was upheld.

In April, Exclusive Brethren members were among a group who took an unsuccessful code of conduct complaint against Laws, by then the Mayor of Wanganui, to the Wanganui District Council.

Author

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