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Hidden prophets



Exclusive Brethren heavyweights ... from left, Phillip McNaughton, Athol Greene and Daniel Hales.

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You don't know these three Sydney suburban businessmen, but their sect has influenced politics in four countries. David Marr reports.

WITH an iron hand, West Ryde businessman Bruce D. Hales rules his world church. To his 40,000 followers in the Exclusive Brethren, this prosperous supplier of office equipment in the Sydney suburbs is known as the Elect Vessel, the Lord's Representative on Earth, the Great Man, the Paul of Our Day, Minister of the Lord in Recovery and Mr Bruce.

For 175 years the sect has counted among its strange proscriptions - no public entertainment, no novels, no eating with outsiders, no university, no membership of other organisations of any kind, no shorts ("God has no pleasure in the legs of a man"), no party walls shared with non-Brethren, no films, no radio, no television and no mobile phones - an absolute ban on worldly politics.

Brethren members have never voted. Since they came together in Dublin in 1829 to live their pure life, they have believed it is God's prerogative and His alone to choose governments, as laid down in Romans chapter 13 verse 1: "The powers that be are ordained of God." That rule held until the 2004 re-election campaign of John Howard where Brethren - never acknowledging their sect - advertised, leafleted and campaigned on behalf of the Prime Minister.

The Brethren fear God, honour the Elect Vessel and love Howard. "I am very thankful for the current Government we have in Australia," Brethren representative Richard Garrett told the Greens' leader Bob Brown a few weeks ago in Canberra. "I mean, in my lifetime we haven't had a better government. We haven't had a better government economically. Whatever way you look at it we have an excellent government in Australia."

Within weeks of campaigning for Howard, Brethren were offering covert but well-funded support for George Bush. Intervention in Canada and New Zealand followed. Earlier this year, Brethren campaigned hard against the Greens in Tasmania. The strategy involved billboards attacking the Greens, towed through Hobart's streets by men wearing party masks of freaks and ghouls. The message on the billboards was: "Dangerous Extreme."

They cover their tracks. The name of the sect is never mentioned. Their political demands are a seamless mix of business breaks and hard-line Christian morality. Under Hales, the Exclusive Brethren have become a new player in the right-wing politics of the world. And they have lots and lots and lots of money.

AUSTRALIA 2004

A FEISTY night of heckling in the 2004 Australian elections was the first - but neglected - clue that the sect had plunged into politics. Greens candidate and intelligence whistleblower Andrew Wilkie was at the Gladesville RSL campaigning when a dull night turned nasty. "They had such a threatening presence about them," Wilkie recalled. "They weren't violent but they were very aggressive."

Voices from the back taunted the candidate about his own marriage and about party leader Bob Brown's homosexuality. "I completely enraged them by endorsing Bob and his sexuality. It got them really wound up." All in all, it was an ugly experience. "I'm pretty streetwise," said Wilkie. "But I was rattled."

Brethren are scattered all over NSW - Windsor, Tamworth, Molong, Ermington - but Howard's electorate of Bennelong on Sydney's lower North Shore is the home ground of Brethren leaders. Mat Henderson-Hau, one of Wilkie's support team that night, knew the hecklers. "I recognised them all as Brethrens. I went to school with a dozen of the guys who came up to cause trouble. I picked Gareth Hales straight off as he used to be in my roll call at Marsden High."

Gareth is the son of Bruce Hales, who lives in nearby Eastwood. Henderson-Hau says Gareth had come with several of his brothers and his Uncle Stephen. He counted seven or eight Hales plus some Kennards and Chesterfields. "They're heavy Brethren families."

Their presence meant nothing to Wilkie or Brown. They didn't connect this rough night in Bennelong with mysterious Liberal Party look-alike ads popping up in newspapers in Sydney and South Australia, nor with leaflets distributed across Tasmania attacking the Greens. Wilkie said: "The Greens weren't aware of a broader campaign being waged." There was no time in the last days of the campaign to track down the names and addresses. The scale of the Brethren operation in Australia went undetected for nearly a year.

THE UNITED STATES 2004

A FORTNIGHT after Howard's re-election, a group called the "Thanksgiving 2004 Committee" registered with the US Internal Revenue Service and placed ads in Florida newspapers supporting the Senate campaign of Cuban-American Mel Martinez, a passionate campaigner against gay

marriage. Newspapers reported the committee had registered too late for voters to be able to determine the source of the money. Press inquiries got nowhere.

A Knoxville map-store owner told the *St Petersburg Times* his committee was "working with a larger group" but refused to identify it. "We like to fly beneath the radar," he said. On election day, the committee placed a hugely expensive full-page ad supporting Bush in *The New York Times* under the banner headline: "America Is In Safe Hands."

The US has tougher rules than Australia for tracking campaign donations. When the financial returns of the Thanksgiving 2004 Committee were published by the Federal Elections Commission in January last year, they revealed that \$US377,262 (almost \$517,000) of more than \$US600,000 raised by the committee came from a Londoner called Bruce Hazell. Press calls to Hazell established little except that he was Exclusive Brethren.

That the Brethren were last-minute, large-scale backers of Bush interested the Federal Elections Commission. A spokesman told the *St Petersburg Times* that "any money contributed by a foreign national and used to purchase advertising so close to an election violates a 1966 law designed to limit foreign intervention in US elections". The commission now tells the *Herald* it cannot comment on whether it is investigating the sect's role.

CANADA 2005

A POLITICAL conflagration was soon blazing as the Canadian Parliament debated same-sex marriage. In March last year, households in the electorate of every member supporting the bill received a greeting card raging against the legislation: "The suicidal rush to fundamentally change a 6000-year-old institution is the canker that will destroy the roots of Canada's 'living tree'."

The card was carefully worded to avoid contravening Canada's hate propaganda law and - there being no election campaign then - it was no offence against Canadian electoral law that the card was signed by "Concerned Canadian parents" who gave as their address a post-office box in a 7-Eleven store in Toronto. Some time in April or May, the concerned Canadians stopped paying for the post box and after that all letters were returned to sender.

"What I do not respect is tens of thousands of dollars being spent anonymously with absolutely no way to contact this organisation," said a Canadian Liberal MP, Mark Holland. "My office has been contacted by hundreds of residents who are extremely upset. Maybe this is acceptable to the Opposition but I would like to know who is behind it. We do not know who is behind it. Is there foreign money? Is there a political party behind it?"

His questions were answered by advertising agent Ron Heggie a few days before the Civil Marriage Act was passed last July. Questioned by journalists after placing a newspaper ad attacking the legislation, Heggie said he and the "Concerned Canadian parents" were Exclusive Brethren. He told the *Vancouver Sun*: "Those who think the Brethren are being unethical and deceptive don't understand their approach to the outside world. It's not that we're hiding anything. It's just that we're not interested in grandstanding."

NEW ZEALAND 2005

THE polite world of New Zealand politics had never seen attack advertising on the scale of the anti-Greens campaign in the elections of September last year. Every letter box seemed to receive a mysterious pamphlet denouncing "The Green Delusion." But as the Prime Minister, Helen Clark, said: "New Zealand is a small country - sooner or later the truth comes out."

Someone recognised the name on the pamphlet - Stephen Win, of Favona Road, Mangere - and called the Greens to say he was Brethren. The media co-ordinator of the Greens, Fran Tyler, had an ace: she knew a party member who had brought with him a directory of members when he fled the sect. She checked with him the names on the ads - there were half a dozen or more attacking Labour and the Greens - and he confirmed they were all Brethren.

When news of the Brethren's role broke 10 days before polling day, the leader of the Opposition National Party, Don Brash - who seemed to be heading for victory - claimed not to know who was behind the pamphlets: "We were not aware they were coming out and had nothing to do with it." But a few days later he had to make the humiliating admission that he'd known all along. "The Exclusive Brethren have told me some time back that they were thoroughly fed up with the Government and they would be distributing some pamphlets."

More was at stake than the embarrassing sight of a politician contradicting himself. Under New Zealand law there are strict caps on campaign spending. If National had endorsed or approved the pamphlets, their considerable cost would count under the party's cap. Brash also had to admit Brethren were canvassing for the party and helping place party ads in the streets.

With political disaster facing National, seven members of the Brethren held a press conference to claim the church had no role in the campaign. The ads and pamphlets were the work of individual believers only. "It is not an Exclusive Brethren initiative," said Neville Simmons, an office equipment supplier from Auckland. The claim was dismissed by ex-Brethren member Doug Field, who told the *Sunday Star Times*: "Nothing happens in the Brethren without Hales's say-so."

Brash lost his chance, but Labour and the Greens lost a swag of seats. The police investigated the role of the Brethren in the campaign - there were also questions about dodgy or incomplete addresses on pamphlets and ads - but no prosecutions were laid. The investigation revealed the Brethren's budget for the campaign was \$NZ1.2 million (\$900,000).

LIGHT DAWNS IN AUSTRALIA

WHILE the New Zealand elections were being fought, the Greens sent Brown a copy of the "Green Delusion" pamphlet. It seemed terribly familiar. The Tasmanian senator Christine Milne took one look and thought, "That's exactly the same pamphlet used against me." A few details were different but "the layout was the same, the language was the same".

Nearly a year after the 2004 elections, the Greens began methodically checking the names and addresses on ads and pamphlets - some attacking the party, some mimicking Liberal Party ads - that had appeared in NSW, South Australia and Tasmania. Several addresses were bodgie. A few

were for Brethren schools. All the people involved turned out to be Brethren. Milne said: "We found there was a systematic exercise all over Australia."

If true, that would require the Exclusive Brethren to reveal what they spent to mount their attack the Greens. Under the Commonwealth Electoral Act, the church or its leader would have to file an electoral return "setting out details of all electoral expenditure in relation to the election incurred by or with the authority of members of the group". The Brethren have never done this.

When the story of the sect's involvement in the 2004 elections broke in the *Herald* in September last year, the church issued the same denials issued when the Brethren were sprung in New Zealand, Canada and the US. A spokesman, Warwick John, claimed the ads and pamphlets were the work of individual businessmen. "The Brethren church has had no involvement whatsoever with the advertisements in New Zealand or any other country."

For ex-Brethren around the world, this claim makes no sense. Here is a church where authority over the tiniest details of believers' lives is maintained by brutal expulsion. For challenging the authority of the Elect Vessel, for watching television, for having a beer with a non-believer, members are expelled from their faith and their family. The emotional carnage is appalling. For these people, the idea that individual Brethren could of their own accord take the revolutionary step of entering worldly politics doesn't compute.

A recent - and fearful - refugee from the sect told the *Herald*: "No one would have countenanced doing this without the complete sanction of the leader universally."

AN HOUR WITH THE ELDERS

In the absence of the Elect Vessel - all but invisible to the outside world - the Brethren delegation sitting in the splendour of Sydney's Observatory Hotel was as heavy as it gets. Accountant Phillip McNaughton arranged the meeting. He had grown up in the sect after his father's expulsion.

The oldest of the elders present was Athol Greene, father-in-law and spiritual adviser to the Elect Vessel. Regarded as a decent man even by critics of the church, Greene was expelled for a while and lived in his garage. Both deferred to quick-tongued, tubby Daniel Hales, the leader's brother.

The Hales excite strong passion among the ex-Brethren. The exiles say the shift into politics - plus a fresh emphasis on business prosperity and greater demands for cash contributions to the church - began in 2002 when Bruce Hales inherited the leadership from his father.

Daniel blamed changing times for Brethren intervening in politics. "I think what you've got to see is that there's been a tremendous shift in the whole world. Go back 50 years when I was a boy, homosexuals went to jail. The Judeo-Christian principles, that are biblical, were taken for granted, weren't they? Sacrosanct. Everybody saluted the flag. Everybody said the Lord's Prayer. In the world that we are now finding ourselves, those things are all up for debate."

But he assured the *Herald* Brethren plunging into that public debate are not doing so with the endorsement of the church. "We do it as individuals." He conceded his brother has never disciplined anyone for campaigning and denies similar ads with similar messages placed by

members of a tightly knit organisation in countries all round the world are evidence of a corporate effort. "It isn't. It's got no church involvement. It's got no school involvement." He added: "You've got to allow for spontaneity."

Despite Brethren putting their names to ads with messages like "Keep Howard in Bennelong" and "Thank You, President Bush!", Hales insists Brethren are not endorsing people or parties: "We don't support the political party per se. We support a principle. If somebody is promoting the right principle - that homosexuality is a sin - we'll support that person."

Homosexuality is hot topic No.1 with the Brethren, but respect for the US is also high on the list. In 2004 Brethren ran an ad campaign in New Zealand supporting the US alliance and nuclear ships. Greene explained: "We believe America is for the general good. They get slandered and God knows what. But if Indonesia gets busy, or Iran or North Korea - then I think they might be glad of a couple of nuclear powered ships."

The tricky part of this meeting - conducted with gusto by these elders - was following the logic that says Brethren are forbidden by God to vote but it's fine for them to urge others to vote. How so? "For exactly this reason," said Hales. "I see it as a sin and you don't. So I'm very happy for you to vote because to you it's your obligation to the community. But to me, it's my conscience that doesn't allow me to vote."

They said the church insists on total honesty and lawfulness. But did it show candour to fight Canada's Civil Marriage Act via a post box in a 7-Eleven? "That's just a sensible move to avoid persecution and anything unfair," said Hales. "It avoids the Mad Hatter attack, isn't that fair?"

These men are all businessmen. They apologised for being strapped for time at the end of the financial year. The source of the sect's great prosperity are little businesses - office fit-outs, carpets, roofing, small manufacturing, farming - that succeed for the best reason: the work is good and they're known to be honest. Brethren families are forbidden to buy boats and holiday houses, go skiing, or spend anything on public entertainment. Booze is allowed but the stern obligation to lead simple lives leaves lots of cash to spare.

Hales gives God credit for this material success. "We don't have a lot of other business interests. We tend to take one small business and just run with it. Our efforts are very much governed by biblical principles." Greene added the text - or the "touch" as they say in the sect: "Whatever you do, labour at it heartily."

And business has brought a certain relaxation to the rules: emails and computers are allowed where necessary for business. "We won't alter a divinely held Biblical principle we believe in," said Hales. "But we're not Luddites."

TASMANIA AGAIN

BOB Brown admits his party was "almost culpably naive" going into the Tasmanian elections earlier this year. Mysterious pamphlets appeared smearing the Greens' lax attitudes to drugs and attacking the party's tax policies. But the focus was on sex: homosexuals, gay marriage, sex-

change operations funded by Medicare and the foul idea that "persons [may] choose their own gender regardless of their sex at birth".

Late in the campaign, the Greens candidate Peter Cover noticed this material was authorised by men in the island's north-east Bible belt. Someone in the party knew someone living down the road from them in Scottsdale. Calls were made. The pig farmer and the carpet merchant on the pamphlets turned out to be Brethren.

Brown called for a Senate inquiry into the sect - into its tax breaks, government funding for its schools, the impact on families of excommunications and the role the church was playing in "Australian politics and political activities".

The Tasmanian Liberal senator Eric Abetz flew to the Brethren's defence, comparing Brown's action to Nazi persecution of the Jews: "When a leader of a political party in Australia starts scapegoating a lawful religious minority the warning bells of history should be ringing loud ... once you remove the Green overcoat, there is a Brown shirt lurking underneath."

Brown's call for an inquiry will be debated in August. The Australian Electoral Commission has confirmed it is still "considering whether the Exclusive Brethren have a disclosure obligation related to the 2004 federal election". And from the ranks of the Brethren comes the faintest, faintest whisper that some brave souls are thinking of moving against the Hales.

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