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The power behind the Brethren

11 September 2005

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After a bizarre week of press conferences and political pamphlets from the Exclusive Brethren, TIM HUME finds that cashflow is not a problem for the business-savvy sect ? neither is contradicting their own beliefs.

It was surely the strangest press conference of the year. Seven pallid, visibly uncomfortable representatives of the country's most secretive church lined up before the media after being outed as the architects of an anonymous political smear campaign.

This carefully mediated appearance was unprecedented for a group which traditionally has no interest in justifying itself to the outside world.

It offered an intriguing insight into the group, prompting outsiders to wonder at a convoluted logic which prohibits voting yet allows a half-million dollar political campaign, and bans military service but anonymously campaigns to bolster the country's armed forces.

The rare accounts of church life from current Brethren are at odds with information from ex-members like Palmerston North woman Ngaire Thomas and Richmond man Doug Field.

Ex-Brethren say members, nearly all born into the church, live under constant surveillance, with an abiding fear of being "shut up" or excluded from others for infringements as minor as wearing the colour red. The church has reportedly used private investigators to monitor its members' activities, and, as many of its members are wealthy businessmen, can afford expensive

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- NZ Newspapers**
- Waikato Times
 - Taranaki Daily News
 - Manawatu Standard
 - The Dominion Post
 - The Nelson Mail
 - The Marlborough Express
 - The Press
 - The Timaru Herald
 - The Southland Times
 - Sunday Star Times
- Regional News**

legal representation in silencing detractors.

Members are forbidden from watching TV, listening to the radio, using computers, reading fiction or using mobile phones. They cannot vote, go to university or even share drains or driveways with outsiders. Women cannot cut their hair; ties are forbidden for men.

The local leadership arrangements of the country's estimated 5000-10,000 Exclusive Brethren is unclear. However, ex-members agree the two leaders are Greg Mason, an Epsom businessman who was at Wednesday's press conference, and Allan Davis, a Wanganui man who owns a produce company and is director of a welding business.

Both apparently take instructions from the group's international leader, Sydney accountant Bruce Hales, who takes an active role directing all church activities and was in New Zealand for a Brethren business conference in Wanganui over a month ago.

"Nothing happens in the Brethren without Hales' say-so," says Field.

Hales inherited the role of "Elect Vessel" or "Man of God" upon the death of his father John in 2002, and has overseen some dramatic changes. Thomas says Hales has started involving the traditionally apolitical but conservative church in direct political interventions, with campaigns taking place in the United States and Australia.

Ex-members differ on the motives for the sudden political push some say he is attempting to achieve favourable economic conditions for his congregation of mainly businesspeople. Others say he wants to impress upon his followers the power he can exert.

Sources claim some at the press conference have close business ties to Hales and his family.

They say Neville and Andrew Simmons whose father Harold was a former Auckland Brethren leader have a longstanding business relationship through their office furniture business Aspect Interiors with Hales and his Sydney office furniture business.

Simmons told the Sunday Star-Times his only business connection with Hales had been occasionally buying product from him over the past decade.

Ex-Brethren say Mason's firm, Pump and Valve Specialties, also has a business relationship with Hales' brothers' pump business in Sydney.

Field says the church has a central fund, the Hales Family Trust, which receives weekly contributions from New Zealand congregations, with a spirit of competitiveness

existing between regions attempting to outdo each other's charity.

"These are good businesspeople with a lot of money but nothing to spend it on. They're not allowed to spend their money on a flash car or a big TV or nice restaurants, so it all goes to the church," says Field.

Several of those from the press conference Mason, Neville Simmons and Hastings businessman Andrew Smith were also members of the Westmount Education Trust, which runs Brethren schools.

Thomas said Exclusive Brethren children generally attended normal schools until about a decade ago, when intermediate and high school-aged children were withdrawn and home-schooled.

Since the trust was established in 2003, 13 Exclusive Brethren schools have been set up around the country, with non-Brethren but Christian teachers.

Thomas, who wants a commission of inquiry into the church's activities, claims many Brethren live lives riddled with hypocrisy, with a mantra of "don't get caught" defining life in the church. She talks of TVs hidden in cupboards, and of teenage Brethren with secret cellphones and MP3 players.

The group's unusual attitude towards technology is revealed in leaked documents detailing plans to provide Brethren businesses with computers a previously banned commodity.

Documents signed by Hales and Davis outline plans to provide Brethren businesses around the world with computers from a centralised office to provide accounting and book-keeping services for their businesses, so they can "operate in a more efficient manner without needing to depend on worldly contractors for the outsourcing of their requirements".

Ex-members claim a similar scheme was used with fax machines, which until recently were banned.

The leadership introduced a scheme where businesses could lease fax machines from the church at well over the going rate, with proceeds going to Brethren schools.

Neville Simmons had not heard of the computer initiative, but said it sounded interesting.

Many ex-Brethren hope the political push may help unravel the sect. Said one: "Many of us who have left are hopeful this political involvement may be the wedge that opens the activities of this group to the scrutiny of government and other parties, resulting in (its implosion) with minimum damage to the victims".