

Background Briefing

on ABC Radio National

Elusive Exclusive Brethren

30 April 2006

They shun contact with the world. Not just with technology, books, radio and TV, but also other people. They do not vote, because voting interferes with God's right to ordain who rules. But Satan has infiltrated democracy and the Exclusive Brethren have started putting money and time into political campaigns.



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Transcript

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THEME

Wendy Carlisle: The Exclusive Brethren are a secretive Christian fundamentalist sect who shun contact with the world. Their members don't vote because government is God's work, and they don't interfere with that.

Reader: We believe from scripture that God ordains the powers that be. He raises them up and puts them down. He uses them to restrain evil. Voting is a political interference with God's rights in this regard. Our place is prayer and testimony.

Wendy Carlisle: But their world leader, Sydney businessman Bruce Hales, the man they call the Elect Vessel, seems to have changed all that. He's steering his flock on a path of political activism that many argue is at odds with the philosophy of not interfering with God's work.

While still not voting, the Brethren are now throwing money at campaigns to support politicians they approve of: half a million dollars to the campaign of George W. Bush, another half-million to the campaign of New Zealand National leader, Don Brash, and large amounts to John Howard's campaign.

Six weeks ago, members of the Exclusive Brethren kicked in tens of thousands of dollars in a campaign to make life difficult for the Greens in the Tasmanian State election.

It might be God's role to choose the government of the day, but the Exclusive Brethren are giving him a helping hand. And it's in the name of fighting Satan.

Reader: Satan infiltrates government and legislation seeking to weaken man's sense of what is due to God. No enlightened Christian would stand by and do nothing while ignorant persons call good evil, and evil good.

Wendy Carlisle: Hello, I'm Wendy Carlisle, and on ABC Radio National's Background Briefing the political coming of age of one of the most secretive of the Christian sects, the Exclusive Brethren, a sect which claims to shun worldly politics, but which is now stepping into the political arena to support what it calls government of moral principle.

This is a story about the world leader of the Exclusive Brethren, Bruce Hales, but we never get to meet him. He's never given a media interview, and through other church spokesmen, declined our requests to discuss the issues raised in this program.

Instead the church leadership sent us a series of faxes, excerpts of which you have just heard and will continue to hear throughout the program.

A few years back the BBC produced a documentary about the Exclusive Brethren. Here's one of the priests talking about Bruce Hales.

Priest: None of us would have known Mr Hales currently was going to be the next man of God. It's something that you might say is God-given, his gift is undeniable, his grasp of the truth, his grasp of mankind, his deportment, is one of a magnanimous, benevolent spirit.

Wendy Carlisle: There are 15,000 members of the Exclusive Brethren in Australia, 40,000 world-wide. According to the principles of their faith they shun contact with those not in the Brethren, people they call 'worldlies'. They don't have friends outside the Brethren, or share meals with 'worldlies', or go to the beach, watch television, listen to the radio or recorded music. They are not allowed to have mobile phones, faxes or computers. Women must wear headscarves and long skirts. Marriages must be approved of by the leadership. Breaking the rules risks excommunication.

They now run their own schools which receive millions of dollars in Federal government assistance, including the Exclusive Brethren's school at Meadowbank in Sydney.

To get Commonwealth funding, Brethren schools must satisfy basic curriculum guidelines. Their attitude to higher education is revealed in this fax to Background Briefing co-signed by the Meadowbank school Principal, David Stewart.

Reader: We do not go in for higher learning. We gave up universities in the 1960s as the hotbed of atheism. They prove that everything is nothing to their own satisfaction. We have suffered no loss to our knowledge. We particularly recoil from novels and cinemas.

Wendy Carlisle: But all is not well within the Exclusive Brethren fellowship. If you go onto the net you can find a number of sites from ex-Brethren discussing what's going on behind closed doors. They meet online for support, talking about their experiences.

Bundaberg hardware shop owner, Trevor Hill was born and bred in the Exclusive Brethren. He had a senior role within the sect. But eight years ago, he decided he'd had enough.

Trevor has never spoken to the media about his experiences, but he agreed to speak with Background Briefing about his decision to leave.

One of the factors that prompted us was the fact that our children were getting older and that the prospect of marriage within the Exclusive Brethren, which is the only thing acceptable, that would greatly complicate the leaving process. And we said, 'Well, for that reason, if not for any other, we must not delay acting on our own convictions in this case. We must make a move.'

Wendy Carlisle: According to Trevor, the Brethren have departed from the teachings of the Bible, and one of the key departures is the very idea of one person having ultimate power.

Trevor Hill: By that I mean he has complete control over whatever he chooses to control. It doesn't mean that everybody necessarily has to ask him everything, but anything that seems to be important is all directed to him, and his word is final and absolute. If he is fed wrong information, and therefore makes a wrong judgment, history shows often that people just have to wear that. You cannot contradict what he says, having said it.

Wendy Carlisle: What are the consequences of contradicting or disagreeing with the leader, the Elect Vessel, who is now Bruce Hales? What are the consequences of that?

Trevor Hill: The consequences of that would be that you would have your own local folk come down hard on you; talk to you, perhaps very nicely at first, about the fact that you have not respected the leader. Down the track then, if you don't toe the line at that point, then you could expect to be put under more pressure until the point would come finally, as it did with us, but a point would come where they would excommunicate you. Now that has pretty drastic implications in respect of families and in respect of the member's business and so forth.

Wendy Carlisle: Later in the program you will hear some stories of how excommunication can separate families. But for Trevor Hill another powerful reason people remain in the Brethren longer than they might wish to, is because of what might happen to their businesses.

Trevor Hill: Over the last 20 or 30 years, Brethren businesses have become, I won't say networked, they are still independent, private businesses, but they in many respects are very, very locked in with the

day to day life of the Exclusive Brethren.

Now what is wrong with that? I would say it's just a factor which is very successfully used in subconsciously influencing people not to leave. That is, 'I stand to lose everything that I have businesswise', if indeed by business is one that is tied up with other Brethren members or other Brethren businesses.

Wendy Carlisle: As you'll hear later, the interconnecting of business with religion has been further tightened just last year.

Australia has a long history of separation of Church and State, but religion is starting to play a part in politics here, much as it does in America, and other cultures. Kim Beazley makes public his prayers, Tony Abbott brings his Catholicism into his government role, and Family First has a Senator in Parliament.

The Exclusive Brethren's belief is that God takes care of government. From this comes the idea that they do not vote, because God's figured that out.

The question is, how do they reconcile their recent political activism with this central theological belief?

In New Zealand, Marion Maddox is an academic specialising in religion and politics. She says the Exclusive Brethren have shifted away from their core belief that Christ will return in the rapture in his own time irrespective of what Christians on earth do. And she says they've moved towards the idea of American Christian fundamentalists, that Christians will not be saved in the final rapture until they first take over government.

Marion Maddox: What's been happening in the last 20 or 30 years, is that they have been moving away from their apolitical stance and coming closer to another fundamentalist view, which is called post-millennialism. That's the idea that actually Jesus' return is not before the tribulations at the end, but after, and it can only happen once Christians have taken over the reins of government, and got the world under Christian control.

Wendy Carlisle: Marion Maddox says to appreciate where the Exclusive Brethren are heading, one should look to the United States.

Marion Maddox: We only have to look at the association between Christian Right politics and the Bush Administration in America. Yes, they are certainly very strong on anti-abortion and anti-gay marriage and those sorts of things, but almost equally so, large parts of the Christian Right have embraced an anti-State campaigning for tax cuts, for getting rid even of State education, the home schooling movement. Some people, not everyone, but some people involved in those sorts of moves

towards small Christian schools and home schooling, think that State education itself is an evil that should be got rid of. There's an idea that people ought to not rely on the State, but should rely on God and therefore even things like old age pensions, or State health care can be an improper intervention of the State between people and God, that they ought to be just relying on themselves, their friends in the Christian community.

Wendy Carlisle: And they go further. If you've fallen on tough times, that's a sign you haven't been a good Christian.

Marion Maddox: For some holders of these sorts of views, the idea is that if you're doing well in this world, then that's a sign that God is blessing you. And if you're doing badly in this world, if you're suffering, if you're poor, if you can't afford the basics of life, well that's a sign that God is not on your side and probably for a good reason. That's the kind of collection of ideas that's often called the Prosperity Gospel.

Wendy Carlisle: In the recent Tasmanian election the Greens were hoping to win a few more seats and possibly force a minority government.

But in the dying days of the election, the Greens were targeted by two campaigns, one from a group of Tasmanian business leaders warning of the dangers of minority government, and the other from a couple of men from Scottsdale, in the State's north-east. The men, later revealed to be members of the Exclusive Brethren, leafleted every letterbox in Tasmania and placed ads in newspapers with an anti-Green message.

Here's a reading from one of their pamphlets.

Reader: Are you aware of the policies hidden behind the environmental veneer? Vote against this deception!

Wendy Carlisle: They attacked the Greens on same-sex marriage and said they were planning to introduce unconditional dole payments for all.

A surreal touch was added when two men wearing pig masks drove around Hobart trailing a billboard with the exact same messages.

On election night in the tally room, the distress of Greens leader Peg Putt was on show for all to see. Standing before her political supporters and opponents and under a blaze of TV lights, Peg Putt broke an unwritten political rule: she blamed others for the Greens' failure to pick up seats.

Peg Putt: Good evening. This has been the grubbiest campaign the Greens have ever seen. Forces were at work behind the scenes trying to covertly influence the outcome. It's true! (BOOING) This is true and

it must be said. There was the right wing religious sect, Exclusive Brethren, who when revealed as behind the well-funded hate campaign targeting the Greens, continued to drive their bizarre car trailer around town wearing masks to still conceal their individual identities. What cowards!

Wendy Carlisle: The political fallout from Peg Putt's intemperate remarks dogged her for days, and finally she apologised for her political transgression. The Hobart Mercury splashed it on the front page under the headline 'My Mistake'.

The Australian newspaper published a picture of two men wearing pig masks, and when Background Briefing asked the leaders of the Exclusive Brethren about this, they said they wondered if it was true.

The political impact of the Exclusive Brethren campaign is difficult to assess. Chief political reporter at The Hobart Mercury is Sue Neales.

Sue Neales: What did have an impact was every household in Tasmania also received leaflets from the Exclusive Brethren. I had one in my letterbox in eastern Hobart. And you know, it was quite strong, it was very anti-Green, you were getting a lot of electoral material in your letterboxes at that point, but you did pick up that one and say, 'Well who's this mob? Who are they?' So I think the fact that they got to every household that way, was a very unusual position for what's essentially I suppose you could calling them a lobbying group, to take.

Wendy Carlisle: The question journalists wanted answered from the Exclusive Brethren was this: Were Tasmanians witnessing a co-ordinated political campaign, or was this, as the men claimed in their newspaper ads and pamphlets, simply the work of a group of concerned Tasmanian families?

Sue Neales managed to get a call through to one of the Scottsdale men behind the campaign, Trevor Christian.

Sue Neales: He said there is no funding at all here from the broader Exclusive Brethren, or from the local congregation. 'I did this on my own', was what he said, 'this is my decision'. Now I obviously am sceptical of that, whether he has the money and the resources to do that himself, but he has an absolute right to do that. I mean anyone has the right to advertise in the newspaper, and during an election, as long as they identify who they are, which he did. So there's not a problem with that, and there's not a problem with the Exclusive Brethren actually playing a role in the election. It's just more an interesting emergence.

Wendy Carlisle: Down on the Tasmanian campaign trail, Treasurer Peter Costello put in an appearance. As details of the Scottsdale men's membership of the Exclusive Brethren emerged, journalists started to put 2 and 2 together: they asked the Treasurer if there were any links between this campaign from the men from the Exclusive Brethren and the assistance the Brethren had given to the Liberals in the 2004

Federal election, and further, were the Exclusive Brethren funding liberal campaigns?

Peter Costello: I wouldn't know. I doubt that they would be, because we're not in the middle of an election. But there is nothing wrong with a person who has a religious belief exercising their democratic right, nothing wrong with that at all. Every Australian is entitled to do that, that's the kind of country we are.

Journalist: Do you support the Exclusive Brethren campaign against the Greens in Tasmania? Do you agree with what they have to say?

Peter Costello: Well look, I don't know what their campaign is, and I don't run it, and I don't take responsibility for it. But I'm asked the question: Have I met people from the Exclusive Brethren? Yes, of course I have. Just as I have from the Catholic church, the Uniting church and the Baptist church and the Temple, the Hindu Temple and the Mosque. And let me let you into a secret: I also meet atheists from time to time.

Journalist: Do you agree with the group campaigning anonymously against the Greens?

Peter Costello: Well look, you ask them about their campaign, I don't run their campaigns.

Wendy Carlisle: In the last few years a distinct pattern has begun to emerge of Exclusive Brethren political activity. the leadership of the Exclusive Brethren claim that when individual members of the sect place political ads, they're doing it off their own bat. But a lot of the anti-Green material emanating from the Brethren has the same feel, the same sentences, phrases and layout as material from elections elsewhere.

To find out more, Background Briefing headed east, to Scottsdale, to talk to the two Brethren businessmen in question.

First stop was Roger Unwin's Pig Farm out on Cuckoo Road a couple of kilometres north of Scottsdale.

Woman: Hi, how are you?

Wendy Carlisle: Good. I'm a reporter from the ABC.

Woman: Oh, right.

Wendy Carlisle: I'm trying to find Roger Unwin.

Woman: I'm sorry, he's not here at the moment.

Wendy Carlisle: Do you know where I'd be able to find him?

Woman: I don't know. I have no idea. I haven't seen Roger today.

Wendy Carlisle: This is his farm though, is it?

Woman: Yes, but as far as I know - well, the gate's locked.

Wendy Carlisle: Background Briefing had no luck tracking Roger Unwin. More phone calls went unreturned. Next stop was the carpet shop of Trevor Christian in Scottsdale's main street. That too was unsuccessful. At first, he was out of the office. Then on a later visit, we were told he had nothing further to add.

Woman: I just managed to contact him.

Wendy Carlisle: OK.

Woman: And he said he won't be back till after lunch, but he isn't interested in talking to you.

Wendy Carlisle: Oh, there's a few points of clarification, things that he's said.

Woman: Right, well he said he's told you what he needs to, so he hasn't got anything more to say you see.

Wendy Carlisle: I haven't spoken to him yet.

Woman: Well he's told ABC basically.

Wendy Carlisle: Then a pattern began to emerge. Returning to Trevor Christian's shop to leave a business card, Background Briefing was given a little yellow post-it note, with a Sydney phone number to call. That phone number belonged to Warwick John, the spokesman for the Exclusive Brethren.

It turns out that the Exclusive Brethren's official spokesman would be dealing with the media on behalf of the concerned families of Scottsdale.

Just opposite Trevor Christian's carpet shop is the Beehive Milk Bar which specialises in cut sandwiches and instant coffee. The man behind the counter is Sam Knight.

Sam Knight: How are you, darl?

Wendy Carlisle: Good. I'm after Sam Knight.

Sam Knight: I am he.

Wendy Carlisle: Oh.

Man: You wouldn't really want to talk to Sam Knight would you?

Sam Knight: What's Sam done?

Wendy Carlisle: I'm told that you're the person ...

Sam's lived in Scottsdale for all of his 50-odd years, his first 18 inside the Exclusive Brethren. But early on, he decided to get out. It wasn't for him, he told me. But one consequence was that after leaving, he never saw many of his family members again. I was keen to know what Sam made of the Exclusive Brethren's foray into Tasmanian politics.

Sam Knight: I was extremely surprised. That would not have happened when I was a small child. That would definitely not have happened. They've never ever voted, they consider that government is appointed by God, and they don't have to take part in it. I was extremely amazed to see their input into the election in Tasmania, because I just thought that's nothing that would have happened. Obviously they have changed their mind about what they do or do not do.

Wendy Carlisle: Can you shed any light on why the Exclusive Brethren are so opposed to the Greens?

Sam Knight: This is very strange to me, and I can't, but I'd only say that it's not their environmental policy. Really the Exclusive Brethren would not be involved in environmental policy. I don't think that there's any drama. It's obviously, it's a bit like the Fred Nile thing I think, it's all to do with the homosexual push, or the same sex parent adoption thing and all this stuff. I'd say it's all to do with family.

Wendy Carlisle: Sam Knight's got some thoughts about why John Howard is popular with the Brethren, but he's not too sure how that fits with the belief that government is put there by God.

Sam Knight: Well they're obviously ultra-conservative people. They are much, much more conservative than John Howard, incredibly so I would say. I suppose they have picked the lesser of all the evils, I don't know. They work on the theory he's the best choice that's available, which makes a bit of mockery of the thing that God will appoint the government. I don't know what they thought God was doing when Paul Keating was in, they must have thought God went to sleep, I don't know.

Wendy Carlisle: On ABC Radio in Tasmania, political reporters were running with the story that the new State Director of the Liberals, Damien Mantac, had met with members of the Exclusive Brethren prior to the election.

Background Briefing caught up with him on his mobile.

Damien Mantac: We had a general discussion as to how we may tackle the Greens down here in

Tasmania, because we need to be mindful that in Tasmania unlike in many other States, the Greens have around a 15% to 20% support rate. So it was an issue as to how we were going to structure our campaign with the Greens down here.

Wendy Carlisle: So you discussed that with the Exclusive Brethren members, did you?

Damien Mantac: No, they asked me what some of my thoughts were, and we spoke in very general terms as to basically what my thoughts were on the Greens, and some tactics I might employ.

Wendy Carlisle: It was reported that you said that the Exclusive Brethren had lent support to the Federal Liberals in and around Sydney in the last Federal election.

Damien Mantac: Yes, that was taken out of context a little bit. My understanding was that the Exclusive Brethren had apparently made some offers; I'm not 100% sure if that is the case, I haven't really followed that through.

Wendy Carlisle: Made some offers to the Liberal Party?

Damien Mantac: Made some offers to, I think it's more done on a candidate-to-candidate basis than the actual formal Liberal Party itself at a State or at a Federal level.

Wendy Carlisle: So did the Liberal party see that as support from the Exclusive Brethren?

Damien Mantac: Oh well, I can't speak for another division or the Federal division of the party.

Wendy Carlisle: It was during the last Federal election that a large number of slick, professionally produced advertisements endorsing the Howard government began to appear in the South Australian press. For some reason they caught the attention of Peter and Bronte Trainor, a middle-aged couple living in a snug little cottage at Bridgewater in the Adelaide Hills.

they realised that even though the ads looked like official Liberal Party material, they weren't, but the question they wanted answered was, just who was behind them?

Peter and Bronte are active in their local Baptist church, describing themselves as Evangelical Christians. And in late 2004 they became political detectives, chasing what they suspected was some kind of connection between the Exclusive Brethren and the Liberal Party.

On a chilly autumn morning, Background Briefing drove up to the Adelaide Hills to meet them, and as they laid out their research on the kitchen table, Peter joked about how it had all become a bit of an obsession.

Peter Trainor: I showed it to a couple of the folk up where I'm studying, and one of them said he'd read

it, and said he was looking for another file on his computer, and he said, Oh that's that one about your obsession. I said, 'It's not an obsession, it's just like a little ...

Wendy Carlisle: A little obsession?

Peter Trainor: Well, it was something we wanted to get to the bottom of, I suppose.

Wendy Carlisle: Some of the first newspaper ads that sparked their interest were ads endorsing the Liberal Party put in by the Principal of an Exclusive Brethren school in Adelaide, but they didn't discover that until much later. Bronte picks up the story.

Bronte Trainor: I started looking at all other advertisements in all the papers, and the day before the election The Advertiser had quite a number of advertisements, so I looked at all of them closely to see if there were any connections. And there was one that really struck me; I thought 'Who's this?' Who's putting in this one? And it was a s full-page advertisement, saying, 'We're happy, John', and I looked down the bottom, I thought, 'Oh well, who's this?' and it had it that it was from a SAET School. I've lived in Adelaide all my life, I've never heard of SAET School. So I checked all the phone books to try and find the school; couldn't find anything.

Peter Trainor: We also checked the address, the address was a non-existing address, so there was no trace of that school, or even of the address that it was supposedly from.

Bronte Trainor: Then I rang The Advertiser to say, 'There's an advertisement in the paper, a full-page advertisement, I was wondering who put it in?' And I said, 'There's no such address, because I'd looked it up in the directory and couldn't find it, so the two things got me going.' And when he said he'd look it up, and he said to me that it was the Liberal Party had put it in, so that really shocked me because there was no Liberal Party logo or anything like that. Later on, I don't know if it was the following week, they denied that it was the Liberal Party that put it in. So I thought Well, perhaps they made a mistake.

Wendy Carlisle: Then they came across another half-page political advertisement authorised by A.K. Grace, at 40 Adelaide Terrace at Ascot Park, on behalf of fellow Australians who, the ad said, were deeply concerned about the future of the country. Under the heading -

Reader: Why the grass won't be greener on the other side

Wendy Carlisle: The ads criticised the Greens' policies for pledging to -

Reader: Introduce environment and carbon levies

Wendy Carlisle: And -

Reader: Cancel all Third World debt

Wendy Carlisle: They urged voters to

Reader: Keep John Howard as Prime Minister

Wendy Carlisle: And the phrase 'environmental veneer' which got a run in the Tasmanian elections, had already been road tested by A.K. Grace.

Reader: Don't let your judgment be clouded by a warm fuzzy environmental veneer

Wendy Carlisle: Peter Trainor thought he'd have a crack at finding out who A.K. Grace was.

Peter Trainor: I then went down town to try to look for these addresses and see what was there. So first of all I went to the address of the advertisement authorised by Mr Grace, Mr A.K. Grace at Adelaide Terrace in Ascot Park, which is a suburban address in southern Adelaide.

Wendy Carlisle: Did you knock on the door?

Peter Trainor: Yes, I went, I just went and knocked on the door. And there was an elderly gentleman who was living there and he said that Mr Grace didn't live there, but he knew of him as a figure who was known in the area, although this person who was living there didn't know of any reason why Mr Grace should be associated with that address. He was renting the property. And this gentleman was obviously a local to the area of some long standing, and he said Mr Grace actually runs a business up the road, about a mile and a half up the road, and so again, I was able to go up to that business premises and talk to people there and find Mr Grace was associated with that business, Edwardstown Carpets.

Wendy Carlisle: And did you find out was there any association with Mr Grace to that property?

Peter Trainor: Well later on subsequently after I'd done a bit more looking around, I went to the appropriate government office to find out who was the actual owner of the property, and that was a Mr Butcher who was not listed, as I recall, in the phone book, and had another address, which at that point I stopped trying to chase up Mr Grace's connection to that particular property.

Wendy Carlisle: Peter and Bronte later discovered, through their own church connections, that Mr A.K. Grace was a senior member of the Exclusive Brethren. And then there were other ads, ads that had an uncanny similarity to official Liberal Party campaign material, but which instead, they discovered, had been placed by a principal of another Exclusive Brethren school, this time from Victoria.

Perhaps all of Peter and Bronte's detective work tracking the Exclusive Brethren connections, seemed like an odd, fruitless obsession.

So what was the big deal?

Peter Trainor: The first was the sense that we had early on, that somebody was trying to hide something from us, if you like, the sense that there wasn't complete openness in the way that the ads were presented so that the addresses were not necessarily correct, the contact details, it was a difficult process to contact people, that I think was the primary concern, as far as the integrity, if you like, of the electoral process that relies really on people knowing where a message of advertising is coming from, who's generating this message that's seeking to influence voters, because it's important to know in the way that you interpret a message, who is delivering it to you, and if you can't find out who's delivering the message, then you don't know whether they may have interests that they're not declaring.

I have to say upfront that I don't have a particular axe to grind against the Exclusive Brethren, and they have a particular approach to their faith which is not by most standards a mainstream approach. But that's their right to pursue their faith in the way that they believe in conscience is the right way to pursue it. In all honesty I don't really have an objection to a religious group being involved in political advertising per se, as long as their interests are declared openly.

Wendy Carlisle: Heading back to town from the Adelaide Hills, Background Briefing decided to drop into Edwardstown Carpets, the business run by A.K. Grace.

Mr Grace's son told Background Briefing that his father was not dealing with media inquiries about the election material. He said the church spokesman, Warwick John, was handling all that.

Is he the spokesperson? He's the spokesperson for what?

Son: The Brethren.

Wendy Carlisle: OK, but this wasn't a Brethren ad.

Son: You speak with him (TOO QUIET TO TRANSCRIBE)

Wendy Carlisle: Some time later, Background Briefing asked Mr Grace by fax what his relationship with 40 Adelaide Terrace was, but he was overseas and unavailable for comment.

Despite claims the Exclusive Brethren are not backing these political ads, the election watchdog, The Australian Electoral Commission is not so convinced.

They're examining whether the Exclusive Brethren should be regarded as third party donors of the Liberal Party. And, if they find that the Exclusive Brethren are behind all these ads from New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania, then they'll be required to file a return with the Commission, detailing how much they've spent as a group, where they've spent it, and where the money has come

from.

Assistant Director of Communications at The Australian Electoral Commission, Brian Hallett.

Brian Hallett: In relation to the Exclusive Brethren, we are having a look to see if there may be some disclosure obligations in relation to the 2004 Federal election that was held at the end of that year, and we're still looking into that. But I think we should just be careful using words like 'inquiry' or 'investigation'.

Wendy Carlisle: You're looking at whether they have a disclosure obligation in relation to being a third party donor, is that correct?

Brian Hallett: That is correct.

Wendy Carlisle: So what is the definition though of a group? Does it have to be a registered entity, an organisation?

Brian Hallett: No, it doesn't. If an individual or an organisation in the community placed advertisements saying 'Vote for this candidate and fix our roads' or 'Vote for that candidate and fix the environment', just to use very hypothetical examples, well then it is fairly likely that under the legislation as it stands at a Federal level at the moment, then that organisation would have a disclosure obligation. The disclosure obligations are to ensure that people in the community actually are aware of the amount that was paid, who it was paid to, and who it was paid by.

Wendy Carlisle: Standing against John Howard in Bennelong in the 2004 Federal election was Greens candidate Andrew Wilkie. Wilkie, who'd hit the news the year before as the security analyst turned whistleblower, was holding a series of public meetings in Bennelong.

Andrew Wilkie: I could go on all night about this subject.

Wendy Carlisle: Later in the meeting, some of the questioning turned a bit testy.

Stephen Hales: Don't know anything about you. Can you tell us something about yourself, your marital status, religion, your family background?

Wendy Carlisle: The man asking the question about Andrew Wilkie's religion and marital status is Stephen Hales, brother of the world leader of the Exclusive Brethren, Bruce Hales.

So while the Exclusive Brethren are not permitted to vote, members like Stephen Hales are actively taking part in political meetings. Background Briefing has also learned, through a search of political returns held by the Australian Electoral Commission that Stephen Hales' business, 'All Pumps Sales and

Service' is a small donor to the Bennelong division of the Liberal Party.

In the 2004 Federal election the Exclusive Brethren were again working beneath the radar in support of the National Party candidate and Baptist church minister, Robert Griffith, in the campaign for the seat of Calare.

Griffith sent out the following excited email to his supporters, and under the sub-heading -

Reader: 'Secret weapon from GOD'

Wendy Carlisle: He wrote that the Plymouth Brethren, which in the north-west of New South Wales is, according to locals, the same as the Exclusive Brethren, had decided to help his political campaign.

Reader: The Plymouth Brethren have been convicted by God to get more involved on the political front. They have now given a commitment to support my campaign in a HUGE way.

The Brethren do not want to be public and too up front about this, so keep it to yourselves, but praise God from whom such miracles flow!

Wendy Carlisle: Until 1987, the world leader of the Exclusive Brethren was an American, James Symington. The man recognised as the most senior member of the Brethren in Australia was Ron Fawkes. But Fawkes fell out with Symington because, according to Fawkes, the leadership was straying from Christ.

In the sudden-death politics of the Brethren, Ron Fawkes was excommunicated. He says he was informed his wife would be divorcing him.

Ron's six children stayed with their mother, and he hasn't seen them for 22 years, but they wrote to him to tell him why, and at his home on the New South Wales Southern Highlands, Ron Fawkes pulled out his children's letters from a ring folder and read them out in a monotone.

You get the feeling he's done this many times before. The message from the kids was all the same.

Dad, you're evil.

Ron Fawkes: Do you want me to read it to you?

Wendy Carlisle: Yes, what does it say?

Ron Fawkes: Dear Dad,

I don't want to see you because you are not right, and withdrawn from and out of fellowship.

John.

Next one is from Richard. To my father.

I am simply writing to tell you of my convictions. I am conscious before the Lord that the only right pathway for a true believer is the 2 Timothy 2 pathway, in Matthew 19, verse 29 the Lord Jesus says and everyone who has left houses or Brethren or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold to inherit life eternal. In the light of this you must realise that we can have no contact with you. In your turning away from the truth, that was once held too, can only be named as apostasy. I take this opportunity just to plead with you to turn from this pathway and to break your links with the enemies of the cross of Christ.

Wendy Carlisle: And the letters went like that one after the other.

Ron Fawkes: Finally from Kenny who was only at that stage when it was written, ten years of age.

To Dad, I do not want to go to see you on Saturday, this is because you are under ...

Wendy Carlisle: Ron Fawkes told Background Briefing that he too had been involved in excommunications.

Ron Fawkes: I just look back with total abhorrence of my involvement in them. Because it was wrong, it's wrong from a Christian point of view, it's wrong from a moral point of view, it's wrong from any point of view you might like to examine it.

Wendy Carlisle: So when you look back at the time when you were the leader in Australia, do you regard the Exclusive Brethren at that time, do you look back on it and see that what you were involved with was coercive?

Ron Fawkes: Yes, absolutely, I look back with total shame and remorse really that I was involved in things that did not truly represent the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wendy Carlisle: Like what?

Ron Fawkes: Like the break-up of families. what happened to me really was, I don't say it lightly, but it was almost payback time.

Wendy Carlisle: Background Briefing would have liked to put these issues to the Exclusive Brethren, but our repeated requests were turned down, though we did get a number of faxes which we'll post on our website.

It was only a few years ago that Brethren faced expulsion from the church for having a fax or a

computer. These were seen as the tools of Satan. Here's how the Exclusive Brethren explained it to the BBC.

Priest: The whole IT system if you like, the computer area is marked and running into the mammon of sin in revelation. The number 666 I'm sure you'll know about, and there it is, bar codes and everything. So we seek just simply to live a life separate from that.

Wendy Carlisle: But now there's been a sudden change of opinion. Faxes, computers, all formerly instruments of the devil, are now OK. But they're only permitted if they are leased by a company run by the most senior members of the Exclusive Brethren.

Background Briefing has obtained a copy of a letter, dated July last year, which outlines a plan to carve up all the businesses in the world owned by members of the Exclusive Brethren into four markets.

Here's a reading from that letter.

Reader: All equipment will be owned and operated by 'National Office Assist' and no authority is given for individual businesses to purchase their own computer equipment.

Wendy Carlisle: According to ASIC documents, National Office Assist operates out of the same business address as two other companies owned by Bruce Hales. The sole director and secretary is a senior member of the Exclusive Brethren, John Kenneth Anderson.

Ron Fawkes also has a copy of the letter.

Ron Fawkes: Well it's advising Brethren that there's going to be centralised accounting for their businesses. It's going to be done under this umbrella of National Office Assist, and it also details what services will be available through it, that is, that computers will be used, but under the control of National Office Assist, and indeed it says that all equipment will be owned and operated by National Office Assist and no authority is given for individual businesses to purchase their own computer equipment.

Wendy Carlisle: So they'd have to be leased from National Office Assist?

Ron Fawkes: Absolutely. And again, it's just total control. I mean it's none of Bruce Hales' business if someone wants to own a computer or a fax machine, that's their business, nothing to do with him. But the sad thing is that these poor blinded souls can't see it.

Wendy Carlisle: If the Hales family name is the most well known inside the Exclusive Brethren then perhaps the next most well known is the family name Joyce. Len Joyce is now in his 60s; he's Bruce Hales' first cousin once removed.

As a young man, Len knew Bruce Hales' brother Stephen, and they even went on church business to Vancouver and New York together. But Len was excommunicated in the 1970s. He won't say why but for the first time he's talking about his experience.

Len Joyce: Yes, the 22nd July, 1976, a day that lives in my mind forever. I kissed my children goodnight at 11 o'clock at night, walked out the door and three of them I've never seen since.

Wendy Carlisle: Did you know that was going to happen?

Len Joyce: I didn't at that time. It's hard to think about it. I didn't think I would get emotional, but it's hard not to. I tried to put matters right, but I was just told that that was it.

Wendy Carlisle: Some years later, Len remarried and since then he's been reunited with some of his children. Len's second wife was a member of the Liberal Party and so Len joined too, quickly becoming heavily involved. He worked on campaigns for former New South Wales Premier John Fahey and other Liberal candidates, including for the Federal seat of Macarthur in 1993.

Len remembers being in the campaign office one day when through the doors sailed two men he recognised from the Exclusive Brethren, including current church spokesman, Warwick John.

Len Joyce: They came in with the offer of money. In fact I spoke with the candidate yesterday and double checked on that. He said they came with the offer of money and they did spend money.

Wendy Carlisle: And so what did you make of it?

Len Joyce: I just shook my head. I was dumbfounded, because we'd always been brought up that God governs with a view to the glory of Christ and he will infallibly bring about what he wants. And this is what Darby said. And he said, 'We don't vote, we submit to the established authorities' I've written it down here 'whatever ilk they may be insofar as they command nothing expressly against the will of Christ or our conscience before God.'

To me, what I wrote down when I was thinking about it was that it was unconscionable, and hypocritical, highly hypocritical, that they should - the persons who do not vote because of conscience can give donations to a political party and distribute leaflets. You know, it just didn't make sense to me.

Wendy Carlisle: Trevor Hill's also got memories of that election campaign. He recalls how he and other Brethren hit the hustings around Bundaberg for the Liberals. He says that when the Brethren's leader, John Hales, father of Bruce Hales, found out about it, they got into trouble.

Trevor Hill: We had become involved in the GST campaign of John Hewson, which I don't remember the year exactly, but we were -

Wendy Carlisle: '93.

Trevor Hill: '93; we were involved with that, we were handing out brochures into letterboxes which we ourselves photocopied. Now that whole thing, that whole arrangement was condemned by the leader, John Hales, therefore those who actually instigated it had to confess that they had done wrong.

Wendy Carlisle: Did you have to confess?

Trevor Hill: Yes. Yes, definitely.

Wendy Carlisle: Trevor Hill had to repent his involvement in the 1993 election campaign because it was an intrusion on God's work. Looking over the political landscape today, he says the Brethren's original conviction that government is put there by God hasn't changed.

But something has.

Trevor Hill: All that they would be going by, and I'm talking about the whole group in total, they would be going by the fact that the leader of today, Bruce Hales, has indicated that this is OK to do. Now mind you, that particular activity will be an arm's length activity. If you ask an Exclusive Brethren person 'Do the Exclusive Brethren support a particular government?' They would say No. What they mean is that officially, this is not a church activity. The thing that I add to that is if you understand the workings of the Exclusive Brethren, no member who is looking after his future and so forth, will ever, ever do anything without the approval of the so-called Elect Vessel.

THEME

Wendy Carlisle: Background Briefing's Co-ordinating Producer is Linda McGinnis. Research, Anna Whitfeld. Technical Operator, Angus Kingston. And our Executive Producer is Kirsten Garrett. I'm Wendy Carlisle, and you've been listening to Background Briefing on ABC Radio National.

THEME

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Sunday 9.10am
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