

25th February 2008

The Hon. Kevin Rudd MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

Exclusive Brethren

I am writing on behalf of a group of ex-members of the religious sect known as the Exclusive Brethren, and many others concerned about their activities. Our ages range from 30 to 80 years, and many of us have suffered traumatic experiences as a result of the doctrines and practices of this sect, whether having “escaped” recently or as long ago as 50 years.

Whilst we concentrate on events within Australia, you should note that the negative impact of the Exclusive Brethren is world-wide. We demonstrate this by attaching a small selection of “life stories”, some of them horrific, of people from a variety of countries and walks of life.

With the Government apology to the indigenous “stolen generation” still fresh in our minds, we wish to bring to your attention many similarities between the suffering and life-long damage inflicted on Aboriginal children, and that inflicted – not by Government agencies – but by the Exclusive Brethren on children and families of members who have “fallen foul” of the leadership for whatever reason. Children have been stolen from their parents on many occasions, across the world, over the past 40 to 50 years.

Prime Minister, we know you are aware of the controversial political and financial activities of the Exclusive Brethren, and the damage they have inflicted on families. We thank you sincerely for your public statement last August, when you said “I believe this is an extremist cult and sect. I also believe they break up families.” Many ex-members around the world know just how true this is.

Your comment was in the context of former Prime Minister John Howard’s close and unhealthy relationship with the sect’s leadership, which has raised many questions about dishonest political campaigning and special treatment for Brethren schools and businesses.

The attached submission aims to provide you and the Government with what we believe is sufficient information to justify a full and open Inquiry into the activities of the Exclusive Brethren, covering in particular:

- An urgent review of taxpayer funding of Brethren schools.
- A review of the eligibility of the Exclusive Brethren for the rate and tax exemptions available to mainstream churches.
- An investigation of the current system of political donations and consideration of similar legislation to that recently enacted in New Zealand as a result of the extraordinary Brethren behaviour during the last New Zealand election.
- An investigation into the costs of Family Court proceedings instigated by the Brethren over the last 40 years and paid for largely by Australian taxpayers.

- An investigation into the many suicides, attempted suicides, family breakdown, emotional abuse, pain and financial hardship endured as a result of the extremist practice of enforced separation between Brethren members and those ex-communicated.
- The continued protection by the sect of members who are known perpetrators of sexual abuse of children, in cases often going back over 40 years.

We respect the fact that Members of Parliament are very wary of conducting inquiries into religious groups, for fear of interfering with the fundamental right to freedom of religion in a free and democratic society. This was evident in the low level of support last year for two separate attempts by Greens Leader Senator Bob Brown to set up a Senate Inquiry into the Exclusive Brethren. Frankly, we were very disappointed that this move was unsuccessful.

We have no desire to persecute or interfere with the religious practices of the Exclusive Brethren. However we point out that there are other extremely important and basic human rights which have been flouted, indeed trampled upon, by the Exclusive Brethren for decades, with horrendous effects on individuals and families. The Brethren tend to have a siege mentality and see any questioning or criticism as religious persecution, when in fact it is they who are doing the persecuting.

The Exclusive Brethren cult is wealthy, powerful and highly litigious. The latest example of this is their attempt in the USA to force the closure of the web site www.peebs.net, used as a crucially important world-wide support network for ex-members and to publicise information about the Brethren. This web site has helped to literally save lives of desperate people, refugees from the cult, by means of an emergency contact system and rapid mobilisation of support to those in need. This was proved as recently as last week with a case in Victoria. Such aggressive and unwarranted litigation must be seen for what it is, and must not be allowed to succeed.

We respectfully ask you to examine the attached submission and life stories. Although some of the Brethren “jargon” may be unfamiliar, and despite some inevitable repetition of certain cataclysmic events, a common thread should be evident; a thread of arrogance, fear, dishonesty, brainwashing and cruelty - unworthy traits of any group that dares to call itself, not only Christian, but the only true Christians. Nothing could be further from the truth; their actions speak louder than any words.

We want to see a comprehensive Inquiry into the Exclusive Brethren – not to persecute the brainwashed and down-trodden rank and file, but to bring the powerful and corrupt leadership to account and to break down the barriers between us and the many family members and loved ones that we miss so dearly – in some cases for many decades.

We have also had contact with sources within the New Zealand Government, who have told us that in principle they would be willing to co-operate with any move by your Government to investigate the activities of the Exclusive Brethren, especially in cases where Family Court procedures are being flouted and children are being emotionally abused. We ask you to make contact with New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark to explore the possibility of a trans-Tasman effort in this matter.

We stand ready to answer any questions, provide additional information and meet with you or your advisers to discuss these serious matters at any time. We look forward to your sympathetic consideration of this submission, and commend it to you.

All of the following people have agreed to have their names listed as in complete support of this submission. The geographical spread of names serves to indicate that the concerns in the submission are by no means confined to Australia.

[The following list of names is intentionally blurred and illegible.]

In addition to the above names, several others have indicated that they strongly support the submission but are not willing to have their names listed, for fear of further intimidation to themselves or members of their families still with the Exclusive Brethren. This, we believe, sends another powerful message about this cult.

For and on behalf of all the above,

Yours sincerely



Peter Flinn

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THE EXCLUSIVE BRETHREN
SUBMISSION TO PRIME MINISTER KEVIN RUDD

February 2008

Introduction

The origins of the Exclusive Brethren can be traced back to Dublin, Ireland in the 1820's, where their first recognised leader, John Nelson Darby met with a small group of Protestant Christians who conducted their own simple services in private homes. Darby, a brilliant upper-class scholar with a strong personality, graduated in law then became an ordained clergyman in the Church of Ireland. He later abandoned the established church and threw in his lot with the "brethren", soon becoming their leader.

The movement grew rapidly, with a major meeting in Plymouth, England, thus becoming known widely as the Plymouth Brethren. However, around 1848, the first of many major schisms occurred over doctrine and practices, resulting in two different factions – the Open Brethren and the Exclusive Brethren. The bitterness between these two streams continues to this day. As the names suggest, the Exclusives became far stricter in their approach, but they themselves have been split apart over the years by many more disputes and schisms. The splinter group of relevance to this submission, claiming a direct line not only back to Darby, but also to the apostle Paul, became known as the Raven/Taylor Brethren, or nowadays the Taylorite/Hales Exclusive Brethren. One of their distinctive doctrines supports an extremist implementation of the Christian principle of "Let every one who names the name of [the] Lord withdraw from iniquity" 2 Timothy 2:19 (Darby Translation). This is their "charter".

This interpretation extends to not eating or drinking with anyone not of the same Brethren faction; refusing university study; refusing access to radio or TV; banning cinema, theatre and all "worldly" entertainment; banning membership of professional associations; banning members from living in accommodation with a shared wall or, bizarrely, a shared sewer; harsh discipline that insists families separate when one member leaves or is disciplined, including forced legal separation and divorce between married couples; and extreme measures to prevent separated and divorced parents from seeing family members.

The world leaders of the Exclusive Brethren since Darby's day, and their periods in power are as follows:

John Nelson Darby: late 1820's-1882

Frederick E. Raven: 1882-1903

James Taylor, Senior: 1903-1953

Interregnum: 1953-1959 (leading to a power struggle between G.R. Cowell and J. Taylor, Jr)

James Taylor, Junior: 1959-1970

James H. Symington: 1970-1987

John S. Hales: 1987-2002

Bruce D. Hales: 2002-present

It is important to note that the policy of extreme separation, described above, began only with the “reign” of James Taylor, Junior around 1960, and, with only minor adjustments, continues unabated to this day.

There are approximately 40,000 members of the Exclusive Brethren world-wide, with around half in Australia and New Zealand. Significant numbers are also located in the USA, UK, Canada, Sweden and some European countries, with smaller numbers in South America and the Caribbean.

Exclusive Brethren Schools

Until around 20 years ago, Brethren children attended State schools. However, they have progressively tried to become more independent of “the world” in several ways, and schooling is a classic example. Home-schooling has since been extensively used for young children, but it was world leader John Hales, father of the current leader, who insisted that the Brethren establish their own schools, with the specific and stated reason to keep Brethren children separate from the world.

In Victoria, their Glenvale School now has ten “campuses”, with another in Hamilton just approved, In New South Wales, their Meadowbank School has 16 campuses, and similar situations exist in Queensland (Agnew School) and South Australia (Melrose Park School).

We – and many members of the public – are deeply concerned about Brethren schools, particularly their education policies and school funding methods. There has been much discussion in the media about this recently. Specifically, we want the following matters investigated urgently:

- The 36% increase in Federal Government (taxpayer) funding for Brethren schools over the past three years, to \$10 million in 2008, and an estimated \$50 million over the next four years, for a national student population of about 2,000.
- Why, despite your concern about Brethren schools expressed when you were in Opposition, your Government has decided to retain the former Howard Government’s controversial private school funding formula for at least the next four years.
- The reported loophole, in a leaked Departmental report, that has allowed even more generous taxpayer funding to Brethren schools because they build “campuses” of one school in widely dispersed locations – up to 600 km apart.
- Whether any of this huge amount of money has been diverted from Brethren schools in Australia to other activities, such as political advertising, building schools in other countries or flying senior Brethren leaders around in their private Lear jet.
- The relationship between Brethren schools and certain Brethren businesses, and whether any business funds channelled into the schools, or vice versa, contravene the Government’s requirement that private schools must be non-profit entities. We have received reports from reliable sources within the Victorian Glenvale School that when Government funds are received, money is channelled into the Brethren marketing company ProVision Marketing, putting at risk funds needed to pay the teachers.

- Why such generous taxpayer funding can be provided to schools which are open only to children of Brethren members.
- Whether computers, which have traditionally been banned, are being used in Brethren schools in the curriculum to the extent expected by your Government, which funds them.
- Whether it is efficient use of taxpayers' money to so generously fund schools whose students are expressly forbidden to proceed to University, irrespective of their academic abilities.

Exclusive Brethren Meeting Rooms

The Exclusive Brethren have always met in simple, austere halls. They reject elaborate church buildings, musical instruments, stained glass windows and ordained clergymen, despite having a very clear and rigid, but mostly undocumented power structure. However, prior to 1960, noticeboards were attached to each hall, advising that the gospel would be preached at certain times, and adding the words "All Welcome". The doors were open to visitors.

In the 1960's, all that changed, the noticeboards disappeared, the doors were locked and only members were allowed in. Over the last 20-30 years, this introspection has become more and more pronounced. Today, Exclusive Brethren halls are veritable fortresses. They generally have no windows, they are surrounded by high security fences, locked gates and security lights, and, especially when there are special visiting leaders, they have security guards to inspect each car as it enters the parking area. No-one other than Brethren members can gain access.

Yet, Brethren halls are still classified as places of public worship – which they most definitely are not – and consequently reap the benefits of charitable status and exemption from rates and taxes, which are quite rightly accorded to mainstream churches, given their open-door policy and charitable work. The Exclusive Brethren reserve their charity only for their own, and operate more like a corporation than a church.

Former Federal Treasurer Peter Costello asserted that the Exclusive Brethren were essentially no different to mainstream churches and were therefore entitled to the same tax exemptions and other breaks. We strongly disagree with this assessment.

- We urge your Government to review the charitable status of the Exclusive Brethren in terms of exemption from taxes and rates.

Exclusive Brethren Political Activities

The political activities of the Exclusive Brethren in several countries over recent years came as a shock to ex-members who were brought up to believe that the Brethren should have no part of politics. It was always considered that “the powers that be are ordained of God” and should be prayed for and respected. Many years ago, they did lobby Governments on the issue of industrial relations, specifically to object to the trade union “closed shop” policy. They were successful in obtaining a provision for conscientious objection to union membership. The Brethren have also never voted, and in Australia where voting is compulsory, they have always utilised the conscience clause to allow exemption.

In the lead-up to the 2004 Australian Federal Election, however, everything changed. Although still not voting, they suddenly became involved in political campaigning, in support of the then Howard Government and opposing the Greens, by means of advertising, leaflets and threatening behaviour at a rowdy Greens meeting in Howard’s seat of Bennelong. Around \$370,000 was spent on pro-Liberal Party advertising, funded through a company called Wilmac, owned by a Brethren businessman. The company was set up just before the election and was quickly wound up afterwards.

The Exclusive Brethren also contributed around \$1 million to George Bush’s re-election campaign in the 2004 US Presidential election, and in 2005 ran a national campaign against same-sex marriage legislation in Canada. In the 2005 New Zealand election, the Brethren engaged in an unprecedented NZ\$1.2 million campaign – including smear tactics – against the Greens and in support of the Opposition National Party, which almost defeated Helen Clark’s Labour Government. Instead, National Party Leader Don Brash was found to have lied about his contacts with the Exclusive Brethren, and was forced to resign. In the 2006 Tasmanian State Election, very similar anti-Greens leaflets to those used in New Zealand were circulated, and again traced back to the Exclusive Brethren. The Brethren also intervened in the 2006 Victorian State Election, with full-page newspaper advertisements opposing the “radical and extreme” policies of the Greens and supporting conservative policies. Similar events have occurred in recent elections in Sweden.

It could be argued that all this political activity is just an exercise of democratic rights to support or oppose certain parties and policies. However, there was a common thread throughout the campaigning by the Exclusive Brethren: that of secrecy and dishonesty. At no time in any of their advertising did they identify themselves. There is evidence that in both Australia and New Zealand, Exclusive Brethren schools were used to conduct political canvassing by telephone. When it was discovered that the Brethren were the source of the campaign material, and were challenged, they maintained that it was “individual exercise”, that is, the various activities at different elections in different countries were conducted or authorised by individual businessmen or concerned citizens, and in no way coordinated by the Exclusive Brethren sect.

Prime Minister, as ex-members who have long experience of the structure and workings of the Exclusive Brethren, we know that any such individual action in election campaigns so widely dispersed across so many countries is completely impossible without authorisation, coordination and control from the world leader, Bruce D. Hales and his small leadership group. Hales, and his predecessors since a major schism in 1970, have always had total power and control of all the money, the decisions and indeed the lives of all members of the Exclusive Brethren “universal position”. The world leader is consulted and asked his views,

permission and decision on every matter or problem that arises. It is absolutely unthinkable that a project of this scale and cost could ever get off the ground without the approval and complete involvement of the leadership.

Let me quote from the experience of Mr Don Monday, A US citizen and former Brethren member who left quite recently and provided information to the recent ABC Four Corners program "The Brethren Express":

"We also observed that a much greater interest was being taken in the political situations in countries where Brethren resided. This became a recurring topic in ministry and resulted in the formation of a US/Canadian Election Commission, with both national and international committees. Local brothers were appointed to represent these committees to their meeting"

As a result of this dishonest political activity by the Exclusive Brethren, Greens Leader Senator Bob Brown tried twice last year, unsuccessfully, to have a Senate Inquiry established into the Exclusive Brethren. We unashamedly assert that we strongly supported this move, even though our personal political views cover the complete spectrum. We were impressed with Senator Brown's courageous attempts, in the face of considerable opposition. We also know that, although he started from a position of understandably defending his party against quite bizarre and emotional attacks, he became increasingly horrified at the many chilling deeds of the Exclusive Brethren over many decades, as he was provided with facts and personal experiences.

Unfortunately, Senator Brown's move failed, and we were very disappointed. We also noted that the Australian Labor Party, although clearly concerned at the reports they were receiving about the political activities of the Brethren, did not support Senator Brown's motion.

You will of course be aware that the Australian Electoral Commission referred certain concerns to the Australian Federal Police over alleged breaching of electoral laws at the 2004 Federal Election by the Exclusive Brethren. That in itself is enough to ring "warning bells" to politicians. However, former Prime Minister John Howard appeared unconcerned. Indeed, during the lead-up to the recent election, he met with Bruce Hales and the Brethren leadership group, including their lobbyist Warwick John, in his Canberra office; quite remarkable, considering a senior figure in the Uniting Church, representing many more church members than the Exclusive Brethren, had been trying unsuccessfully to meet with Howard for three years!

It has just been revealed that a nine-month Federal Police investigation has cleared the Brethren of two out of three allegations of breaking federal electoral laws, with one investigation still continuing. Knowing what we do, this is very surprising. It is, however, noteworthy that the Brethren kept a much lower profile during the 2007 Federal Election campaign than they did in 2004.

We believe that there had to be a link between the undoubted political influence of the Exclusive Brethren on the Howard Government and the funding and support they gave to the Government. This was evident in the area of industrial relations, where they appeared to win special dispensation from the Government to exclude union officials from Brethren businesses without consulting their staff, and, as outlined above, in funding for Brethren schools.

- Prime Minister, now that you are in Government, we believe that you have a responsibility to pursue the full extent of Exclusive Brethren influence over Government policy in recent years. You will be aware of the recent legislation enacted by the New Zealand Government, covering political donations, following the havoc wreaked by the Exclusive Brethren in the 2005 New Zealand election. We urge you to review the recently relaxed laws relating to political donations in Australia, and to consider similar legislation to that of New Zealand so that shadowy groups like the Exclusive Brethren can never again exert such influence in Australian politics without appropriate scrutiny and disclosure.

Family Court Proceedings

One of the most distressing legacies of the extreme separation doctrine of the Exclusive Brethren, has been the many harrowing cases in the Family Court, in both Australia and other countries. Examples of these can be found in the Life Stories contained in the Appendix to this submission.

The Exclusive Brethren are highly litigious. They fight legal battles in the courts very hard, and appear to have no shortage of funds for so doing. Where a member of the sect is “withdrawn from”, or decides to leave as a result of a disagreement with the leadership, the consequences are horrendous. Those excluded are prevented from seeing their children, spouses and other family members. Naturally this can result in legal disputes, where a member fights to achieve access to his or her family, and the Brethren fight equally hard to prevent it.

We have hard evidence of a “fighting fund” reserved for legal cases, including in the Family Court. This money comes not only from regular Brethren donations but also bequests. We have a copy of the will of a single elderly Brethren lady, which clearly follows a common template, and which states, in part:

*“I Give to my Trustee the sum of \$.... for his own use and benefit and without placing any legal obligation. I express the desire that he use such bequest for payment at his sole discretion to any trust or other fund existing at my death or subsequently for the purpose of **meeting legal costs and expenses related to actions in the courts in any part of the world** arising from the maintenance and defence of the Truth contained in the Holy Scriptures and taught and practised by J.N. Darby, F.E. Raven, J. Taylor Sr. J. Taylor Jr., J.H. Symington and J.S. Hales and it is my desire that such funds should be expended in not more than five years.”*

Note that this will was dated prior to the assumption of power by the current world leader, Bruce D. Hales on his father’s death (John S. Hales) in 2002.

It can be seen that this practice, if repeated world-wide after each death of a member, would result in the Exclusive Brethren leadership amassing a large sum of money for the purposes of litigation.

Former Chief Justice of the Australian Family Court, Alistair Nicholson, has stated that on two occasions, delegations from the Exclusive Brethren asked him for special treatment, seeking that if someone leaves the Brethren, they have no right to further contact with their partner or children. This, of course was not lawful, and Mr Nicholson could not oblige them. He also accused the Brethren of “failing to comply with court orders” and “stacking Family Court rooms with supporters to intimidate opponents” (Melbourne Age, 17th October 2007). However, there are many cases where a former Brethren member has been granted access to his/her children, but through various carefully managed ruses, the Brethren have prevented this happening by influencing the children against the father or mother (normally the father) and by simply wearing people down over time so that they eventually give up, not wanting to subject their children to further stress or damage.

We recommend that you examine the ABC Four Corners interview with Mr Nicholson, which can be found at the following link:

[Four Corners - The Brethren Express
www.abc.net.au/4corners/special_ed/20071015/brethren/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/special_ed/20071015/brethren/default.htm)

Such actions are cruel, calculated and an intolerable abuse of basic human rights.

Our other concern is the extent of taxpayer funds used in Australia to pay for Family Court proceedings instigated by the Exclusive Brethren over the past 40 years.

- Prime Minister, we understand that this issue involves the judicial system more than the Government. However, we ask you to consider what can be done by Government to strengthen the hand of the Family Court to prevent human rights being so clearly ignored and flouted by the Exclusive Brethren, even when a court decision favours a former member whose family has, in effect, been stolen by the Brethren.
- We request a Government investigation into the costs of Family Court proceedings instigated by the Brethren over the last 40 years and the extent of Australian taxpayers’ funds used for this purpose.

Family Breakdown and its Effects

Prime Minister, you yourself have publicly expressed your concern that the Exclusive Brethren is an extremist sect and cult which breaks up families. In August 2007, you stated that:

“They split families and I am deeply concerned about their impact on communities across Australia.”

This is the absolute and horrible truth, and it has been happening for between 40 and 50 years. Again, it is due to the ruthless application of the doctrine of separation, justified by the need to “withdraw from iniquity” (2 Timothy 2:19). The definition of “iniquity”, according to the Exclusive Brethren, has over the years included disagreement with the world leader on any subject, daring to be a member of a trade union or association, possessing a computer, mobile phone or fax machine, visiting a beach in summer, missing a Brethren meeting and many other trivial matters.

Being “withdrawn from” means losing everything – family, friends, employment, house, the lot. Young people have been thrown onto the streets, from a system of close supervision and control, into the big, bad world, for which they were ill-prepared. Not surprisingly, some have drifted into trouble, and have sought solace in alcohol and drugs.

Prime Minister, like thousands of Australians, we recently watched the intensely emotional scenes in Canberra, as you delivered the Government’s apology to the indigenous “Stolen Generation”. Many of us were particularly struck with your words, as follows:

“To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.”

You could have been talking about the Exclusive Brethren! Whilst we do not want in any way to detract from those searing events that affected so many Aboriginal people, we could not help seeing startling similarities between the effects on them and the effects on our own – several – stolen generations, over a period of 40 to 50 years. Yes, children have been stolen from their parents; there is no other way to describe it. The difference in our situation is that the “stealing” was done for reasons of religious fanaticism, and no apologies have ever been made by the Exclusive Brethren, and the likelihood of this happening is slim indeed.

Let me quote from The Melbourne Sun, 20th September 1962:

“A Blackburn couple claimed yesterday that the Exclusive Brethren sect had “stolen” three of their five children. They said that the three children had been ‘hypnotised’ by sect members.”

Sect members had arrived at the parents’ home some time earlier and taken the girls away. The youngest was 16. The parents had left the Brethren 18 months earlier, and they had a radio in the house – something banned by the sect. One of the daughters was subsequently married to another sect member, and the parents were not told.

All this was the direct result of the “reign of terror” introduced by James Taylor Junior in the early 1960’s, and continued to this day by his successors, James Symington, John Hales and currently Bruce Hales. Forty-six years on, nothing has changed.

One tragic consequence of all this heartbreak and cruelty is the number of suicides and attempted suicides – as a direct result of the Exclusive Brethren splitting families. We know of 24 confirmed deaths, four of which were actually murder/suicide, and a further 18 suicides yet to be confirmed as a result of Brethren actions. Note that painstaking research has established the facts of the 24 deaths, and is continuing for the others. There have also been many attempted suicides.

Prime Minister, all we can do here is to respectfully ask you to read the attached 13 Life Stories. There is no need for us to introduce or explain them. They speak for themselves, graphically, and we defy you not to shed a tear as you read of the evil deeds perpetrated by this so-called church that purports to be a very special group of Christian people.

Sexual Abuse

This is an intensely difficult and sensitive matter, and we are aware that it has occurred among all sorts of communities and organisations – religious or otherwise. Sadly, the Exclusive Brethren are by no means exempt from it.

In the case of the mainstream churches, many cases of past sexual abuse have been exposed and dealt with in recent years. Offenders have gone to jail, and apologies have been made to the victims. Whilst nothing can undo terrible past crimes, at least this has gone some of the way to help.

Unfortunately, no such actions have been taken by the Exclusive Brethren. Their reaction in such situations is to close ranks, withdraw immediately from the offender and cut him loose. There have been several cases of sexual abuse of children by Brethren members, or former members, recently exposed in the media – some of them going back many years. We believe there are more cases to come out. Whether they will, depends upon the willingness of the victims to go to the police. The problem is that the victims have been looked upon as guilty themselves, and are so frightened and brainwashed by this cult that they do not want to compromise “the position”. This is also the view of the leadership – they are far more concerned about protecting themselves and the interests of the sect, financial and otherwise, than for concern and compassion for the victims.

Essentially, the Exclusive Brethren are protecting and hiding sexual predators within their ranks. This is appalling and intolerable.

The only way we see to alleviate this situation is for increasing pressure to be brought on the Exclusive Brethren, through the media and hopefully with support from the Government, so that the barriers that exist between the Brethren and the outside world can, piece by piece, be broken down, and families re-united. That is our ultimate objective: to see our families again and to allow them healthy contact with the outside world, so that this fear-ridden community can seek help with problems and pain perhaps endured for decades.

Anything that the Government can do to help us with this difficult issue would be deeply appreciated.

Peebs.Net Web Site

You will have been sent, within the last week, a press release indicating that the Exclusive Brethren, through their “Bible and Gospel Trust” have instituted a lawsuit against the owners of www.peebs.net, a web site currently based in the USA which provides an essential support network, indeed a lifeline, for ex-Brethren refugees anywhere in the world, as well as vital information for the public about the cult.

The web site has had to operate anonymously, the only reason it has survived for four years. Two previous web sites were forced to close by legal action brought on by the Brethren. Again, they have no hesitation of exerting their money and power to crush dissent, not just within their own ranks, but also to those who want to tell the world about their activities and provide a forum for often severely damaged ex-members to talk about their experiences and seek support.

The web site has an emergency and secure contact system, so that someone in trouble, trying to escape the clutches of the cult, can seek help, or just someone to talk to. This facility has literally saved lives.

As recently as ten days ago, a young Victorian member of the Exclusive Brethren contacted the site, saying he was in desperate straits and had tried to kill himself. It was quickly established that the call was genuine, and the support system sprang into action. A message was sent to a few trusted members in Victoria from the site owners in the USA, and within a couple of hours, we were talking face-to-face with the young man, listening to him and offering encouragement and a safe environment. Within two days, he had made his decision to leave a difficult and threatening Brethren situation, was in a safe house and had been offered employment.

This is one of the main functions of the web site. Yet, the Exclusive Brethren, through their lawyers, are desperate to shut it down. The site owners have been forced to go public, so the Brethren now know who to target. However, enormous support has recently emerged from around the world, with US\$20,000 raised so far to assist the site owners with legal support.

Prime Minister, again this should clearly signal to you the type of organisation we are dealing with here. Whilst the legal case is in the USA, it closely affects many people around the world, including in Australia. We are hoping the media will publicise this outrage, and again, we look to your Government for any help and support that may be available.

Conclusion

This somewhat lengthy document is a serious attempt to bring to the attention of the Australian Government the truth about the Exclusive Brethren. They appear to some people, and would have you believe, that they are a quiet, law-abiding, hard-working, somewhat secretive, a little odd but fairly harmless Christian church who are minding their own business, but who feel persecuted by a hostile media and disaffected ex-members for their legitimate religious beliefs.

Nothing could be further from the truth. They have caused untold pain and misery to individuals and families all over the world for 50 years; they are closely controlled by a ruthless leadership obsessed by money, power, security and secrecy; they have tried to pervert the political process in several countries; and they use a labyrinth of financial trusts and other mechanisms, at best doubtful and at worst illegal, to secure Government funding and exemptions from rates and taxes for their Brethren-only schools which try to control and restrict learning opportunities for their unfortunate kids, and their barred, bolted and windowless meeting rooms masquerading as places of public worship.

We believe Government action is urgently needed. We believe the former Howard Government was seriously in error for cultivating a close relationship with them. Perhaps that was one of the reasons for that Government's political demise. We believe the Exclusive Brethren are political poison. We are sure New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark would agree with that assessment.

In short, we believe the Government must set up an appropriate Inquiry as soon as possible, to review what we believe are unfair and over-generous advantages provided to this damaging cult, and to provide a mechanism for full exposure of the cruelty and pain they continue to inflict on families and communities throughout the world.

All this may sound very negative, but a boil must be lanced in order for it to heal. We truly look forward to the day when we can embrace members of our families and friends whose company we have been deprived of for anything up to 50 years. We are not indulging in religious persecution; in fact we are trying to stop it, together with the abuse of many basic and important human rights. Our dream is for the Exclusive Brethren system to wither away of its own accord as its corrupt leadership is exposed for what it is; alternatively, for the Brethren to continue their doctrines and practices as they see fit, with the important distinction that they too respect the rights of ex-members to have full and free access to their families, without any more interference, coercion or brainwashing.

APPENDIX: THIRTEEN LIFE STORIES

Please note:

With the exception of the account of the late Dr Vernon Sealey, all of these experiences have been prepared individually by the respective authors. They have agreed to tell their stories especially for this submission to the Prime Minister. Many of the stories tell of extremely painful events, and are provided on the understanding that the names of the authors are kept confidential. Many of the people involved still have close family members within the Exclusive Brethren, and are anxious that no harm will come to them as a result of the information being provided. We have given the authors an undertaking that their stories will not be used for any other purpose by us without their express permission.

Several other ex-members would have liked to provide their stories as well, but they fear the consequences for their loved ones still inside the Brethren system. In one case, tentative contact with family members has been secretly re-established after some years. If this particular story were told, and word of it somehow reaches the Brethren, that long-sought contact would immediately cease, with fear and anxiety caused to the “captives”, who are elderly. Yes, this is another example of emotional abuse.