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The Brethren Express

Reporter: Quentin McDermott

Broadcast: 12/10/2007

They don't vote and they repudiate any organised role in politics. It's God's call, they say, whether governments stand or fall.

But behind the scenes, members of the small, publicity-shy Exclusive Brethren sect have developed a political muscle that surpasses their numerical strength - and they enjoy flexing it.

In August, it was revealed that Exclusive Brethren elders had met with the Prime Minister and the Treasurer, despite earlier disturbing exposes (including on Four Corners) about how the church splits up families. The Brethren have been linked sporadically to several recent election campaigns, most notably in New Zealand.

But as Four Corners reveals, the Brethren have a vigorous and largely untold political history going back at least to 1993, when John Hewson lost the "unloseable" election to Paul Keating.

Four Corners follows the political trail of the Brethren over 14 years and spells out how in the past few years its members have ramped up campaigning, spending millions in state and federal elections and overseas, including

the USA.

Players say the Brethren are a force that cannot be ignored. "The Exclusive Brethren are a real factor in changing votes," says Greens leader and Brethren adversary Bob Brown. In New Zealand, it's claimed clandestine campaigning by Brethren at one stage threatened the Government.

This investigation calls into question the Brethren's claim that political involvement is a matter for individuals. It explores how Australian election advertising costing hundreds of thousands of dollars was arranged, paid for and accounted for. In the USA, ex-Brethren tell how they were marshalled for campaigns.

But why do Brethren bother with politics at all? Four Corners looks at the conservative religious beliefs that have underpinned their recent electioneering.

Quentin McDermott's report also examines how the Australia-headquartered Brethren raise funds from abroad - a process nicknamed "the Brethren Express", as an ex-member tells it.

"The Brethren Express" - on Four Corners, 8.30 pm Monday 15 October.

This program will be repeated about 11.35 pm Tuesday 16 October; also on ABC2 at 9.30 pm Wednesday and 8 am Thursday.

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