

Religion Report

on ABC Radio National

The Exclusive Brethren and Federal funding

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With the Rudd government in office- where to now for the Exclusive Brethren? John Kaye MP (Greens) on the Exclusive brethren, Federal funding and the tax-payer dollar.

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Transcript

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Back home now, and in the lead-up to last year's Federal election, Kevin Rudd described the Exclusive Brethren as an "extremist cult" and he expressed particular concerns about their schools.

So when is he going to withdraw their \$10-million in private school funding? That's the question being asked by New South Wales Greens MP, John Kaye. John Kaye joins us now. Just remind us precisely what the Prime Minister said about the Exclusive Brethren last year.

John Kaye: On August 22nd, speaking in Adelaide, the Prime Minister described the Exclusive Brethren as an extremist cult and sect. He went on to say, 'I also believe that it breaks up families. I also believe that there are real problems with the provision of modern education for kids under their system, for example, not giving access to the full range of information technology assistance.' He went on to say that Mr Howard has responsibility to level with the Australian public, 'remember the Exclusive Brethren are currently under investigation by the Australian Federal Police concerning previous election activities. Mr Howard needs to be fair dinkum with the Australian community rather than pretending this just "some other group". They are not. They split up families and I am deeply concerned about their impact on communities across Australia.'

Stephen Crittenden: Well one of the interesting things there is that Kevin Rudd made specific mention of his qualms about Exclusive Brethren schools.

John Kaye: Kevin Rudd makes a major issue out of education and the Exclusive Brethren schools. He could have, but did not go on to say that they're probably the only schools in Australia that are closed, in the sense that they do not allow people, students who do not belong to their particular religion to go to those schools. I don't know of any other publicly-funded religious education institution that does that in Australia.

Stephen Crittenden: Yes, I know you've made a particular point about that, their refusal to accept enrolments

from children who aren't members of the cult, but why is that an issue? I mean presumably they would get an exemption under the Anti-Discrimination Act if they needed to there on the grounds of religious belief.

John Kaye: Well look, all private schools have automatic exemption from the Anti-Discrimination legislation, both State and Federal across Australia, but our point is that these schools around Australia in 2008 will receive more than \$10.1-million. That's public funding, that's money which is being spent on a public purpose. That money is not intended for private purposes. People pay taxes with the understanding that money is going towards expenditure for all children in Australia, not for the education that is conducted by a sect for a sect internally and behind closed doors.

Stephen Crittenden: Julia Gillard, the Education Minister, has indicated that the new government will retain the funding formula that it inherited from the previous Prime Minister for at least another four years. Presumably you would want to be mounting an argument that the Exclusive Brethren schools somehow represented important exception to that funding formula.

John Kaye: We think Julia Gillard's unconditional commitment to the Howard funding formula was irresponsible. This will lock in something like \$50-million going to the Exclusive Brethren, when the leader of her party has acknowledged that they're a sect, has acknowledged their real issues about their education system and has acknowledged that this is an organisation that breaks up families. It seems to us that to make a blanket commitment to a funding formula which the Labor party has been critical of, is not the right thing to do. There need to be exceptions made where the funding is going to schools and institutions which are simply not acting in the public benefit.

Stephen Crittenden: I'm presuming you have no problem with the Exclusive Brethren running their own schools, that where you do have a problem is that the Australian taxpayer should be paying for them when the Exclusive Brethren is so hostile to Australian democratic political values.

John Kaye: We certainly don't believe that the Australian government should be paying for the destruction of Australian values as goes on in Exclusive Brethren schools. The issue of whether they should be allowed to run schools or not, comes back to child protection issues, whether it's appropriate that children be so profoundly excluded from opportunities in society by not giving them opportunities to learn about information and communication technology, whether this is an appropriate way for an organisation to behave or not is another question, and one that I think needs more investigation.

Stephen Crittenden: Would you agree that Kevin Rudd, in his statement last year about the Exclusive Brethren being an extremist cult and sect, seemed to have opened the door in fact to just that kind of broader investigation?

John Kaye: I suspect Kevin Rudd regrets having said those things inasmuch as not that he thinks they're not true, but as much as he's opened up a Pandora's Box; it's difficult for a Prime Minister of Australia to have said

those things and to continue to allow funding to flow in the way it is and in the way it will, and to preside over that without any critical examination of the way in which the school operates.

Stephen Crittenden: OK, let's gaze deeply into this Pandora's Box then. We know that you're a proponent of support for public education. Is it too easy for new independent schools to get accreditation at present, do you think?

John Kaye: The situation with the Exclusive Brethren and also the situation with teaching Intelligent Design as science in a large number of schools around Australia, indicates to the Greens that there are real problems with accreditation and with the way new private schools can set up. When the Howard government came to power in 1996, they abolished a thing called the New Schools policy, so there's no federal regulation on the way schools are set up. In New South Wales alone, there are a large number of schools - teaching about 15,000 students - which teach Intelligent Design as science. We're deeply concerned about -

Stephen Crittenden: Creationism, straight up and down, as science as well in some cases I suspect.

John Kaye: Well in some cases Creationism is science, in some cases Intelligent Design, which is really Creationism in drag as science. And we're very concerned that that shuts those children out from access to modern biology and modern biotechnology, without an understanding of the evolution hypothesis and with the sort of evidence that goes along with Creationism and Creation Science confusing these children. We're very concerned that what we're going to see is a generation of children coming from these schools who simply are shut out from biotechnology and bio-sciences, which are in many ways the essential sciences of the 21st century.

Stephen Crittenden: John, I think there's some evidence that our education policymakers have lost the ability to construct an argument to defend mainstream secular education values against something like Intelligent Design. How do you construct such an argument?

John Kaye: The Greens argue that we need to put the children first, and how their lives are going to be affected by education, and without a sense of ignoring the political power that now grows from some of the private school lobby, if we don't ignore that power, then we're losing sight of what's in the best interests of the children. We're very concerned that the growth of a lot of these small schools, particularly in outer suburban areas, is undermining public education, but also undermining some commonly-held liberalist values within our society.

Stephen Crittenden: I can hear some our listeners saying 'this is an attack on pluralism' that they are listening to, other listeners saying 'it's about time someone came to the defence of mainstream secular values'. Where do you draw the line? How do you draw the line?

John Kaye: Look, I accept it is not an easy proposition to find an exact line between the two. But we would argue that we are in fact defending pluralism, not attacking pluralism. This is about making sure that every child grows up with the right to make those complex decisions about what their world view is and how they are going

to participate in our society. Where we have educational institutions that seek to deny children the right to participate, then it seems to us that this is a major attack on pluralism. It's a major attack on a society where individuals do have a right to engage in a wide variety of belief systems, of levels of activities within the economy. By sequestering children within narrow belief systems that run counter to commonly accepted scientific and rationalist views, we think there are grave dangers being faced by our society.

Stephen Crittenden: Thank you very much for being on the program.

John Kaye: Thank you, Stephen.

Stephen Crittenden: New South Wales Greens MP, John Kaye. And we'll keep coming back to that Pandora's Box later in the year.

Guests

John Kaye

M.P. (Greens)

Further Information

[Exclusive Brethren on wiki](#)

[John Kaye NSW Greens MP \(Homepage\)](#)

[Exclusive Brethren homepage](#)

[Exclusive Brethren story on ABC "Background Briefing"](#)

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Presented by
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