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## Sect furore 'astonishes' PM

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**PRIME Minister John Howard said today he was astonished that people thought it odd for him to meet members of the Exclusive Brethren religious sect.**

It was reported today that Mr Howard had met senior members of the sect, including a man under police scrutiny for his spending on Mr Howards's 2004 election campaign, in his parliamentary office two weeks ago.

"As prime minister, I have met an enormous number of organisations. It's my job," Mr Howard said today.

"I find it quite astonishing that people think it odd that I have met with a lawful organisation. I do not deny for a moment I have met with members of the Exclusive Brethren, and why not? They're Australian citizens, it's a lawful organisation."

Mr Howard said he did not know whether the Brethren had made any donations to the Liberal Party.

"As for matters of financial support you should talk to them," he said.

Among those Mr Howard met in his electorate office was reportedly Mark Mackenzie, a Sydney pump salesman whose company, Willmac, allegedly channelled \$270,000 into advertising for the 2004 election in support of Mr Howard.

The Australian Electoral Commission later investigated the Willmac money, while an Australian Federal Police investigation is continuing.

Treasurer Peter Costello today also admitted meeting the Exclusive Brethren many times.

"There's nothing wrong with meeting the Exclusive Brethren, they're Australian citizens just like anybody else," he said on Southern Cross radio.

The sect's world leader, Bruce D. Hales, his brother Stephen and another elder, Warwick John, also attended the August 8 meeting with the Prime Minister, a sect spokesman told Fairfax.

The spokesman denied the group asked for Mr Howard's help on the police probe or offered the PM assistance in his battle to retain his Sydney seat, Bennelong, against star Labor candidate Maxine McKew.

The spokesman said the elders assured Mr Howard they were praying for him, and that Willmac and Bennelong were not discussed.

Stephen Hales ran the Brethren's pro-Howard campaign in Bennelong in 2004, the report said.

Opposition frontbencher Anthony Albanese said Mr Howard's relationship with the Exclusive Brethren sect was a worry.

"It is of a real concern that this sect can say that they can get a meeting with the Prime Minister of Australia on no notice and with no agenda," he said.

Mr Albanese said the Exclusive Brethren were out of touch with mainstream Australian family values.

Their beliefs were "anti-Australian and anti-family."

"Exclusive Brethren don't believe in voting but do believe in interfering in election campaigns, and they have a history not only of covert funding and also engaging in personal attacks and smears against non-extreme right-wing conservative candidates," he said.

"Increasingly, (we see) a desperate prime minister who is prepared to associate even with sect organisations like Exclusive Brethren in order to hold onto his seat."

It is not the first time the Exclusive Brethren have been linked to national politics.

A private detective in New Zealand claimed last year that he was hired by the Exclusive Brethren to dig dirt on Labour MPs including Prime Minister Helen Clark, and her husband.

Miss Clark said at the time that she had been told the Exclusive Brethren religious sect had hired a private detective to follow the couple.

"The Brethren stand condemned for this activity and frankly if the (Opposition) National Party does not now renounce any support either now or in the future from the Brethren then its credibility goes down the gurgler with them," she said.

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