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Exclusive Brethren attacks Rudd

Sid Marris | August 23, 2007

THE separatist conservative Christian movement, the Exclusive Brethren Church, has accused Kevin Rudd of unwarranted and inaccurate slurs against its members.

The Opposition leader said on Wednesday he would not meet the group because its lack of tolerance and antiquated policies, particularly the treatment of children.

Mr Rudd said the Exclusive Brethren were a "dangerous cult" and asked John Howard to reveal the contents of his dealings with the group's leader.

But Church leader Bruce Hales said the group did not live in isolation and insisted the "organisation" did not involve itself in politics.

"Our homes are situated amongst the homes of other Australians and in business we employ and deal with the general community," he said in a statement issued by email.

"We encourage education and our children have retention in Years 11 and 12.

"Contrary to what Mr Rudd proclaims, our schools have IT facilities and audio-visual equipment which the students are encouraged to use and the level of curriculum offered provides access to tertiary studies."

Mr Hales said Mr Rudd's reference to an Australian Federal Police investigation into political donations was a "very public slur" because the Australian Electoral Commission had recently told a Senate inquiry the original complaint had been examined and would not be pursued by that authority.

Individuals in the Brethren have made large donations to politicians and finance advertising campaigns against left wing political groups, such as the Greens, claiming their policies undermined Christian values.

Mr Rudd was speaking after it was revealed that John Howard met with some of the group including Mark McKenzie, whose pump company Wilmac donated the \$270,000 to the Prime Minister's campaign in Bennelong in 2004.

Greens senator Bob Brown has campaigned against the group, which has been active in Tasmanian elections, proposing motions in the Senate reviewing Government funding for the community's schools and tax concessions.

Labor voted with the Coalition against Senator Brown's motion last year.

Health minister Tony Abbott as well as Treasurer Peter Costello have met members of the church. Mr Abbott today accused Mr Rudd of un-Australian behaviour after outlining details of two meetings he had had with the group.

It included an exclusion from workplace laws which he said Labor supported in parliament.

"Look their theology is not my theology, but as far as I am aware, they're perfectly good citizens, they obey their laws, they pay their taxes, and why is Kevin Rudd discriminating against this particular Christian group," he told Sky News.

"If a politician was refusing to meet with every religious group which didn't exactly correspond with his own ideas of true religion, you'd start excluding an enormous number of people. For Kevin Rudd to discriminate against these people on the grounds of religion, arguably, he is the person who is being un-Australian."

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