

Printed August 22, 2007 05:48pm AEST

Rudd attacks PM over cult dealings

Andrew McGarry and AAP | August 22, 2007

OPPOSITION leader Kevin Rudd has called the Exclusive Brethren a "dangerous cult" and asked the Prime Minister to reveal the contents of his dealings with the group's leader.

The secretive conservative Christian group Exclusive Brethren were an "extremist cult" and politicians should avoid meeting them. Kevin Rudd said yesterday.

Mr Rudd said he was on the record as saying he would not meet with members of the group, adding that he had rejected approaches from the Exclusive Brethren at Parliament House in Canberra and in his Brisbane electorate of Griffith.

"I believe this is an extremist cult and sect," Mr Rudd said.

"I also believe that it breaks up families, I also believe that there are real problems with the provision of modern education to kids under their system where they, for example, are not given full range of access to the full range of information technology systems."

Mr Rudd was speaking after it was revealed that John Howard met with the leaders of the group, Mark McKenzie, despite an ongoing Australian Federal Police investigation into donations by his pump company Willmac.

Willmac spent \$270,000 campaign for Mr Howard in 2004.

Treasurer Peter Costello has also met with the group.

Mr Rudd challenged the Prime Minister to "level" with the public about the extent of the Liberal Party's involvement with the Exclusive Brethren.

"I think Mr Howard has a responsibility to level with the Australian public how much money has the Exclusive Brethren given to the Liberal Party, what was the content of his most recent meeting with the elected vessel, the so-called supreme leader of the Exclusive Brethren, and what undertakings have been given (to the group)?" he said.

"... Could I just say that the Australian public deserves some answers, on all of these things Mr Howard needs to be fair dinkum with the Australian community rather than just pretending they are just 'some other group'. They are not. They split families and I am deeply concerned about their impact on communities across Australia."

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.

Mr Howard said there is nothing wrong with him meeting with members of community groups, including the Exclusive Brethren religious sect.

But Mr Howard deflected questions about whether the sect was providing election funding for the Liberal Party.

Mr Howard said today it was his job as prime minister to meet with all sorts of organisations.

"As prime minister, I have met an enormous number of organisations. It's my job," he told reporters in Sydney.

"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 professed ignorance over whether the Brethren had made any kind of donation to the Liberal Party.

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

"These are things you should talk to the Liberal Party organisation about; I don't handle, in a direct sense, any fundraising matters."

Mr Costello downplayed the significance of his meetings.

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

"Over the years, I've had many meetings with the Exclusive Brethren, just as I have with people from other churches.

"This is no crime. In fact, the crime would be if a member of parliament refused to meet with somebody on the basis of their religious convictions.

"I don't know why the newspapers get so worked up about it. These are people who are constituents, Australian citizens, they follow their own religious beliefs and they've got every right to do so."

Copyright 2007 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).