

Printed August 25, 2007 01:04am AEST

Should we go on meeting like this

Elisabeth Wynhausen | August 25, 2007

OTHER people can't just stroll into the Prime Minister's office and chew the fat, as far as we know. But according to Tony McCorkell, spokesman for the Exclusive Brethren, that is just what happened when Howard met leaders of the reclusive sect two weeks ago.

"It was purely a last-minute meet-and-greet type arrangement," McCorkell tells Inquirer.

The Brethren at the meeting included salesman Mark Mackenzie, who is under investigation by the Australian Federal Police for the money he spent in 2004 on election advertising promoting Howard and attacking the Greens. Mackenzie, who reportedly makes a modest living selling and servicing pumps, spent \$370,000 on advertising and leaflets, money funnelled through Willmac, a small company incorporated a few weeks before that election.

Mackenzie was there with Bruce Hales, the world leader of the sect, who's known as the Elect Vessel, Hales's brother Stephen and fellow believer Warwick John.

The Elect Vessel lives in a large, lavishly refurbished house in Eastwood, a bit of the Bible belt in Howard's Sydney electorate of Bennelong. But he doesn't vote: Exclusive Brethren are forbidden from voting. That's a comparatively minor prohibition by their standards. They are also prohibited from socialising with people who aren't Brethren (a prohibition regularly used to break up families, according to numerous media reports).

They also used to be forbidden from involving themselves in earthly politics, but as has been reported, they've been leaving footprints all over the political process since Hales took over as Elect Vessel a few years ago. The results have not always been as anticipated. Nor has the furtiveness for which they are now renowned, always helped cover their tracks.

They were caught out in the New Zealand election in 2005, after pouring money into the campaign in the hope of replacing NZ Prime Minister Helen Clark and her Labour Party with the conservative National Party, and then Nationals leader Don Brash.

The Brethren had hired a private detective to follow Clark's husband. Clark accused them of smearing her and her husband. The Nationals lost anyway. Brash quit the leadership, then the party, shortly before the publication last year of a book that exposed his links to the Brethren's dirty campaign.

While that was enough to finish Brash's political career, in Australia the revelations about Howard's meet-and-greet provoked an outbreak of egalitarian fervour. A stampede of Liberal Party politicians hurtled to the nearest microphone to declare they'd not only met the Brethren many times but would be failing in their democratic duty if they hadn't.

Overlooking the fact that he had just pressed the flesh with a bloke being investigated by the feds, Howard stoutly declared that in meeting the Elect Vessel and his pals he was doing what the rest of us pay him to do.

"It's a lawful organisation and as Prime Minister I have met an enormous number of organisations. It's my job."

Treasurer Peter Costello went one better telling radio station 3AW's Neil Mitchell:

"Over the years I have 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 somebody on the basis of their religious convictions."

Health Minister Tony Abbott chimed in: "I have no reason to think they are not people of decency and goodwill."

None thought to add that they'd have to be fruit loops not to meet a bunch of constituents busting to spend several hundred thousand bucks to get them re-elected.

Greens leader Bob Brown has been on the Brethren's case since it emerged that the sect secretly bankrolled anti-Greens campaigns on both sides of the Tasman.

There are Exclusive Brethren communities in the central west of NSW. In 2005, when Howard was touring the drought-stricken area, Brown was telephoned by local people, he says.

"They told me the school at Lake Cargelligo waited for Howard for an hour while he met the Exclusive Brethren."

Questions about it to the Prime Minister's office go unanswered. Not so questions to the ALP.

Mark Arbib, general secretary of the NSW Labor Party (a post he is quitting to contest a Senate seat), breaks records in his haste to suggest that contact with the group could do political damage.

"It's going to have a huge impact in the Prime Minister's seat," he tells Inquirer.

"The one thing Australians don't like is extremism in any form. And this is definitely a group that holds extremist views."

Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese has been no slower to avail himself of the opportunity for a flurry of free kicks: "We know that John Howard is under real pressure in the electorate of Bennelong," he tells journalists.

"It would be very interesting to see whether the Exclusive Brethren, as a result of this meeting, are once again engaged in spending tens of thousands of dollars trying to influence voters in the lead-up to that campaign."

But McCorkell is determined to have it understood that nothing of any significance transpired at the meeting and nothing worth talking about was said. No one so much as mentioned the AFP investigation of Mackenzie, McCorkell says.

"There was no discussion regarding Willmac and no discussions of politics at all. The meeting was very uneventful. The meeting was about praying for the Government."

If so, the Brethren leaders spend an inordinate amount of time lining up meetings in the corridors of power. They've even asked for meetings with Labor leader Kevin Rudd.

"They've asked Mr Rudd on several occasions," McCorkell says. "He has made appointments from time to time and cancelled without giving reasons."

This week Rudd made it plain he would sooner find himself in a roomful of strippers than a roomful of Exclusive Brethren.

"I believe this is an extremist cult," he said.

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