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Brethren claims lack credibility

The Dominion Post | Wednesday, 28 February 2007

Labour and the Greens have reacted with predictable scepticism to Exclusive Brethren claims that the controversial foray by church members into the 2005 election campaign had nothing to do with the church itself, The Dominion Post writes in an editorial.

Brisbane businessman Tony McCorkell, the church's newly appointed spokesman, said this week there had been "no church-sponsored, organised involvement in anything political" and blamed the anonymous leafletting campaign on "overly enthusiastic members".

If his first remarks as church spokesman are any indication, the unworldly sect, whose members are not allowed to vote or socialise with non-members, has taken to the dubious art of public relations as swiftly as it took to the equally dubious art of political dirty tricks.

It is not credible to suggest that sect members in New Zealand, Australia and the United States just coincidentally decided at the same time to try to influence election results using the same secretive techniques. Nor is it credible to argue that the hundreds of sect members who helped National candidates during the 2005 campaign did so without direction from church leaders, or that the seven businessmen who funded the anti-Labour, anti-Green campaign just happened to be senior members of the church.

But politicians and the public can take some heart from Mr McCorkell's assertion that the way the church was dragged into the 2005 election was a "nightmare".

Putting aside the fact that no one other than the church's leaders "dragged" it anywhere, this is reason to hope the sect will conduct itself with more probity in future.

There is nothing wrong with the church expressing a view on who should govern the country, though some of its positions reek of hypocrisy. How can you excoriate the Government for running down the defence forces, but refuse to allow your members to join those same forces? How can you deny your members a vote but attempt to influence the votes of others?

However, debate is good for democracy. We need more of it, not less. Too many New Zealanders have become so disenchanted by the antics of our politicians that they have turned away from politics altogether.

That is not in anyone's interests. Democracy is enhanced by robust debate.

Whether it's stimulated by employer organisations, unions, the Exclusive Brethren or anyone else is beside the point. The one proviso is that those expressing a view should identify themselves.

The problem with the Brethren campaign was not that the church expressed an opinion, but that its members resorted to subterfuge to try to conceal their identities.

That has given the Government an excuse to hatch plans to restrict or ban so-called third party campaigns during elections. But a ban is not warranted or necessary.

New Zealanders are entitled under the Bill of Rights Act to impart and receive information, especially at times as critical as election campaigns. And so long as the public know who is paying the piper they know who is calling the tune. The Government should not forget that the Brethren campaign did more harm to National than to Labour.

Once the identities of those behind it became known, National's willingness to accept succour from such a bunch of weirdos raised serious questions about the judgement of its leaders.

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