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The ghosts of funding past

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James Norman

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WITH any change of government there will be legacies the new government would rather not have inherited.

The Howard government's flirtation with some extreme religious groups is a case in point.

Now the ghosts of this legacy are creeping back to haunt Kevin Rudd.

It may prove to be one of the first policy challenges the new government must face.

The government of John Howard saw fit to fund certain faith-based schools around Australia under the auspices of religious freedom in a democratic country.

In theory, that's fine, but in the case of the Exclusive Brethren, there are deeper questions about how it may indoctrinate children.

Yet under just released school funding figures, this controversial and secretive religious sect will receive \$10 million in taxpayer money to run its schools this year.

This will increase to \$50 million in taxpayer subsidies because Prime Minister Rudd pledged to continue the Howard government's controversial private school funding scheme for the next four years.

Money is also being provided under the previous government's Investing in Our Schools program.

The Exclusive Brethren schools, which refuse to teach students who are not sect members, include Melbourne campuses in Glenroy, Lilydale and Melton.

There are also campuses in NSW, Tasmania and South Australia.

Private or religious schools have an exemption from school licensing authorities and can choose which students can attend their schools.

In the case of the Exclusive Brethren, it seems the more we know about them the more cause for alarm we should feel.

While the Brethren does not allow its members to vote, the Howard government's interest may have been elsewhere. The Brethren supported the Howard election campaign in 2004 and funded pro-Howard advertisements.

During the last federal election campaign, Kevin Rudd described the organisation as an "extreme religious sect".

The Labor Party questioned the Brethren's approach to the internet and computers during the election campaign when Labor promised a rollout of computers to schools.

But despite having been vocal in his criticism of the sect in Opposition, Prime Minister Rudd now casts himself as a political hypocrite.

Why will the funding continue beyond the next federal election?

Is he no longer concerned that Aussie kids are being subjected to an extreme, faith-based education that will surely leave them ill-equipped to negotiate their way in a modern world?

Is this part of Kevin Rudd's much vaunted education revolution?

James Norman is a Melbourne journalist and author

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