



## PM met with extremists: Rudd

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Article from: AAP

- Howard met with Exclusive Brethren at his office
- Sect accused of meddling in election campaign
- Costello also admits meeting sect members

FEDERAL Labor leader Kevin Rudd has labelled the Exclusive Brethren an extremist cult and called on Prime Minister John Howard to reveal what was discussed when he met its senior members recently.

Mr Rudd said he had real concerns about the impact of the Brethren on Australian communities and refused to meet its members.

"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 information technology."

Mr Rudd's comment followed a report today that Mr Howard had met senior members of the sect, including a man under federal police scrutiny for his spending on the Prime Minister's 2004 election campaign.

Mr Howard said today there was nothing wrong with him meeting with members of community groups, including the Exclusive Brethren, but deflected questions about whether the sect was providing election funding for the Liberal Party.

Mr Rudd said Mr Howard should detail the content of his most recent meeting with the Exclusive Brethren.

"Mr Howard has a responsibility to level with the Australian public," he said.

"How much money has the Exclusive Brethren given the Liberal Party, what was the content of his most recent meeting with the ... so-called supreme leader of the Exclusive Brethren and what undertakings have been given.

"Remember, the exclusive Brethren are currently under investigation of the Australian Federal Police concerning previous election activities.

"The Australian public deserves some answers on all of this, Mr Howard needs to be fair dinkum with the Australian community rather than pretending `they are some other group'.

"They are not. They split families and I am deeply concerned about their impact on communities across Australia."

Mr Howard said earlier today he was astonished that people thought it odd for him to meet members of the Exclusive Brethren.

"As prime minister, I have met an enormous number of organisations. It's my job," Mr Howard said.

"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 said he did not know whether the Brethren had made any donations to the Liberal Party.

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

Among those Mr Howard met in his electorate office was reportedly Mark Mackenzie, a Sydney pump salesman whose company, Willmac, allegedly channelled \$270,000 into advertising for the 2004 election in support of Mr Howard.

The Australian Electoral Commission later investigated the Willmac money, while an Australian Federal Police investigation is continuing.

Treasurer Peter Costello today also admitted meeting the Exclusive Brethren many times.

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

Health Minister Tony Abbott also said he has met with members of the Exclusive Brethren sect and may do so again.

Mr Abbott today said he had met with members of the ultra-conservative Christian group, although not recently.

"I certainly don't believe I have had any recent meetings but, look, I will meet them again if I get the chance," he said.

Mr Abbott said he had no problem with his colleagues meeting members of the Exclusive Brethren.

"They are Australians, they are citizens," he said of the sect members.

The sect's world leader, Bruce D. Hales, his brother Stephen and another elder, Warwick John, also attended the August 8 meeting with the Prime Minister, a sect spokesman told Fairfax.

The spokesman denied the group asked for Mr Howard's help on the police probe or offered the PM assistance in his battle to retain his Sydney seat, Bennelong, against star Labor candidate Maxine McKew.

The spokesman said the elders assured Mr Howard they were praying for him, and that Willmac and Bennelong were not discussed.

Stephen Hales ran the Brethren's pro-Howard campaign in Bennelong in 2004, the report said.


A private detective in New Zealand claimed last year that he was hired by the Exclusive Brethren to dig dirt on Labour MPs including Prime Minister Helen Clark, and her husband.

Miss Clark said at the time that she had been told the Exclusive Brethren religious sect had hired a private detective to follow the couple.

"The Brethren stand condemned for this activity and frankly if the (Opposition) National Party does not now renounce any support either now or in the future from the Brethren then its credibility goes down the gurgler with them," she said.

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