

National Story

Brethren ponder new strategy for elections

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By [Louisa Cleave](#)

Senior members of the Exclusive Brethren are considering setting up a separate, official group to front political campaigns.

The group, including high-ranking church leaders, funded a \$1 million pamphlet campaign against National's opponents at the last election, and more recently lashed out at Government plans to effectively ban third-party campaigning of that nature.

Their comments prompted Exclusive Brethren world leader Bruce Hales to send spokesman Tony McCorkell to New Zealand this week to discuss the impact of their actions on the church. The seven men and Exclusive Brethren deny their comments are sanctioned by the church and say they are speaking as private taxpayers.

But the Government has been critical of attempts by the church to distance itself from the group.

Labour Party president Mike Williams said yesterday the men were up front about their church connections when they lobbied MPs in 2003.

Mr Williams released a lobby paper, "Suggested Initiatives For Prosperity in New Zealand", from six members of the church, including two members of the current group of seven, which outlined church principles.

Among the paper's suggested initiatives for defence was to "alter" New Zealand's nuclear free policy "to allow US Navy visits", and to apologise for opposing the Iraq war "and anti-American attitude".

Following discussions with Mr McCorkell yesterday, Neville Simmons, a senior church figure and one of the seven men, indicated the group would have more to say in the lead-up to next year's election.

"We'll pick our issues. We'd like to be able to comment on topical issues as they arise and there will be things we may have a particular interest in, such as health, and we may want to put out a statement or a policy on that."

Mr McCorkell said the group had made it clear they would not mention the church when commenting on politics. "One of the things we discussed in fair detail was how they might go forward in a way that is separate from their church affiliations. The idea of a separate entity was raised."

Mr Simmons said the separate group was "quite an exciting idea" but the men would have to seek professional advice.

"We've always been quite a loose grouping and the thought of having a body or forum that we can speak on behalf of, we think has got a lot of merit. There's the mechanics of it to work through. I wouldn't say we've arrived on a decision on that but we're certainly looking at that closely."

Mr McCorkell said the men also wanted to "reserve the right" for other church members to endorse their views "and that would not be frowned upon".

"Of course there is no issue with that, the church is neither here nor there on that." They had discussed the group's plans to get further involved in politics.

"I think it's going to be an issue by issue basis. This group stands for strong morals and good Christian principles so I dare say if something went against what they believed, they would probably have a say."

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