

World Story

# Howard secret sect meeting 'desperate'

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SYDNEY – The secret meeting of Australian Prime Minister John Howard with an ultra-conservative Christian group shows how desperate he is to win the next election, opposition frontbencher Anthony Albanese says.

The Prime Minister's relationship with the Exclusive Brethren sect was a worry for Australians, Albanese said yesterday.

"It is of a real concern that this sect can say that they can get a meeting with the Prime Minister of Australia on no notice and with no agenda," he told reporters.

"We are particularly concerned to find out whether the election campaign coming up later this year was discussed," he said.

Albanese said the beliefs of the Exclusive Brethren were "anti-Australian and anti-family".

In New Zealand, Labour MPs have attacked National's links with the Brethren, which ran an initially covert \$1.2 million campaign attacking Labour and the Greens in the lead-up to the 2005 election.

In Australia, Fairfax newspapers reported yesterday that on August 8 in his parliamentary office, Howard met Mark Mackenzie, a Sydney pump salesman whose former company Willmac funnelled \$370,000 into pro-Howard advertising for the 2004 election.

Willmac's spending subsequently triggered an Australian Electoral Commission investigation and a federal police investigation, it said.

Albanese yesterday told reporters the sect had campaigned in the Prime Minister's seat of Bennelong in Sydney and had paid for full-page newspaper ads.

"Exclusive Brethren don't believe in voting but do believe in interfering in election campaigns, and they have a history not only of covert funding and also engaging in personal attacks and smears against non-extreme right-wing conservative candidates," he said.

"Increasingly, [we see] a desperate Prime Minister who is prepared to associate even with sect organisations like Exclusive Brethren in order to hold on to his seat."

– AAP



John Howard is said to have a relationship with the Exclusive Brethren sect.