

# Exclusive Brethren's email set stage for Electoral Finance Bill

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By [Audrey Young](#)

Labour's determination to pass the Electoral Finance Bill goes back to an email sent to former Chief Electoral Officer David Henry on Wednesday, June 8, 2005.

It set out how a group from the Exclusive Brethren wanted to spend over \$1 million to campaign for the election of a National government without the money having to be counted as a National Party election expense.

The law allowed them to spend limitless amounts attacking the Government but they had to be a lot more careful in how they voiced their support for Don Brash and National.

Labour argues the campaign was an attempt to buy the election result.

The email was from Ron Hickmott, who described himself as a Christian businessman. He had spoken to Mr Henry earlier in the day and was now formally asking for a meeting with him to clarify the Electoral Act 1993.

He was going to bring three other Christian businessmen to a meeting with Mr Henry the following Tuesday: Andrew Simmons and Phil Win from Auckland and Matt Goudie from Palmerston North.

The email speaks for itself:

"We represent a group of Christian businessmen concerned as to the course and direction of the current [Labour-led government]. Accordingly we have put together an election programme with a budget of \$1.2 million with the goal of 'getting party votes for National' as this is the only way change will come about.

"Our programme involves extensive publications throughout the country with a theme showing and demonstrating mistrust in the current Government and building trust in a Brash-led National Government.

"We write seeking clarification and direction re the election funding issue, specifically that anything we do does not compromise National's funding position [their emphasis].

"Typically,

1. Does it compromise National's position if we communicate to MPs and candidates our strategy?
2. Does it compromise National's position if we show them draft publications before they are published?
3. Is there any legality prohibiting us printing 'Vote National,' 'Vote Brash' and including a photo of Dr Brash on [the advertising]? Can this be done without compromising National's funding position?
4. To what extent can we legally advise, direct, assist, communicate or other with National MPs and candidates?"

On the date that the email was sent, no one but Prime Minister Helen Clark and her inner circle knew when the election was going to be held.

## Election spending row

Democracy under attack from Government Bill

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*The Herald*

had run an article just the day before setting out all the dates the Prime Minister might choose between July 30 and September 24 – it was eventually September 17 and she announced the date on July 25.

If the date had been the earliest, July 30, the regulated period would have been all of May, June and July.

Whatever the date, National's coffers were chock-a-block. The business boycott of National under Bill English's leadership in the 2002 election had been lifted with the election of Don Brash to the National leadership.

It undoubtedly had more money to spend than the \$2.4 million it was allowed to within the three months before an election.

So National broke conventions and started its campaign spend-up well outside the regulated period.

National's red and blue billboards (iwi/ kiwi, tax/cuts) had been going up over the country for several months.

While the media coverage more than doubled the value of the billboards because of the commentary they continued to attract, Labour was seething that National's wealthy donors were allowing it to campaign for a greater part of the year than other parties.

The Christian businessmen outed themselves during the election campaign about the same time as the heat went on Dr Brash over what he knew about their activities.

National believes that the Exclusive Brethren cost the party the election (Labour polled 2 points higher than it did).

Other factors fed into a review of the law: the traditional select committee inquiry into the election, some confusing case law on what comprises an election expense arising from the unsuccessful electoral petition taken by Winston Peters against Bob Clarkson in Tauranga, and election law reform overseas, particularly in Canada and Britain.