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Wednesday Aug 22 20:44 AEST


 TEXT 

Exclusive Brethren denies links to PM

Wednesday Aug 22 15:00 AEST



By ninemsn staff

The secretive Exclusive Brethren religious group has allowed a TV crew into its compound for the first time, in a bid to curb its reputation as a politically motivated cult.

The group opened its doors to a crew from *A Current Affair* on Monday, after they turned up unannounced to the

Brethren's annual global meeting in Perth.

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Meanwhile Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd has slammed the religious group as an "extremist cult" that breaks up families.

The exclusive interview comes after the Prime Minister's office admitted meeting senior leaders of the Exclusive Brethren a fortnight ago.

One of those present at the August 8 meeting was Mark Mackenzie, a Sydney salesman who is being investigated by police over a \$370,000 cash spend on John Howard's 2004 election advertising.

However, James Hale — cousin of the sect's elusive leader Bruce Hale — denied the Brethren had any financial ties to the PM.

"We believe in praying — praying fervently for good government," Mr Hale told *ACA*. "We don't back anyone, the church backs no-one."

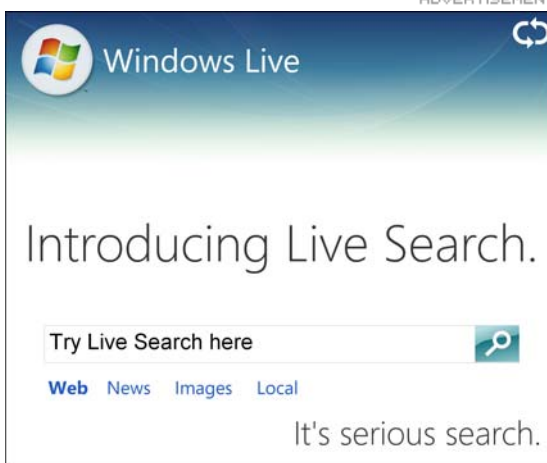
When asked if the sect was bent towards conservative interests, Mr Hale admitted, "We're conservative, but Labor likes to paint themselves as conservative these days too."

The meeting between the PM and senior Brethren leaders has raised questions over whether the sect is supporting Mr Howard's bid to retain his seat of Bennelong. They are allegations both the government and the Brethren deny.

Earlier this year, government whistle-blower Andrew Wilkie claimed he felt the full force of the Brethren when he stood against the Prime Minister at the last election.


"Clearly a large amount of money was going into political campaigning which, at the end of the day, was supporting John Howard, if only indirectly," Wilkie told *ACA*.

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Mr Hales said the group allowed the ACA crew into their compound in order to help improve public perceptions. "We just think that the bad press out there is unwarranted, we're good people," he said.

For the full interview, watch *A Current Affair* tonight at 6.30 on the Nine Network



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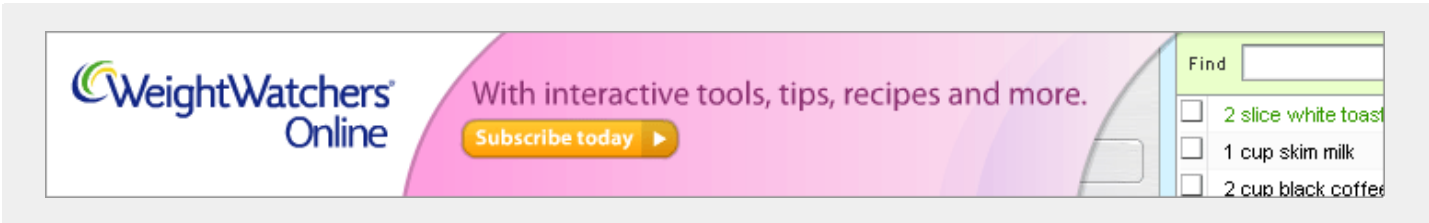


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