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Parliamentary committee rejects Brethren petition

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A parliamentary committee has rejected a petition from Exclusive Brethren members calling for MPs to stop "denigrating" them for their participation in the "2005 election debate".

The petition of Wellington church member Graeme Murray Turley and 26 others requested "the House instruct its members to desist from denigrating a minority group known as the Exclusive Brethren because some of its members independently chose to lawfully participate in the 2005 election debate".

It followed Labour MPs attacking National's links with the Brethren, which ran an initially covert \$1.2 million dollar campaign attacking Labour and the Greens in the lead up to the election.

Government ministers also trained their guns directly on the Brethren at times.

Defence Minister Phil Goff labelled the Brethren a "clandestine" and "extremist" group that were guilty of "lies and dishonesty", while list MP Jill Pettis said the secretive sect "were just concerned about power, influence and money".

Parliament's standing orders select committee yesterday rejected Mr Turley's petition, saying members had freedom of speech within Parliament's debating chamber.

MPs should be mindful that people cannot immediately respond, but "members are not prevented from commenting in severe terms on the conduct of people outside Parliament if they consider it necessary to do so," the committee's statement says.

"The House is a forum for robust debate, not least when members are referring to political activity."

If people thought they had been maligned they could apply to the Speaker to have their response incorporated into the parliamentary record.

The Brethren had a response recorded to Mr Goff and Ms Pettis' comments in November last year.

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