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## Showdown looms for secretive sect

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**Scrutiny is bringing trouble for the Exclusive Brethren, reports David Marr.**

THE father stood pleading on the steps but his children would not come. When he tried to enter the house, one of the men standing guard on the veranda cried out that if he dared touch the doorknob, the wrath of God would come down on him, for he was an adulterer and no adulterer would enter that house. The father retreated to his car and called the police.

Since leaving the Exclusive Brethren in 2003 he had had little access to any of his eight children. Once you depart, the sect slams all doors behind you. But a hard-fought battle over three years ended in December with the Family Court granting him contact with the two youngest, aged eight and 13. He promised not to expose them to radio, TV, computers or propaganda against their faith. They were due to spend a first few days together in January.

Justice Robert Benjamin had taken the sect apart in his 100-page judgement delivered in Hobart. He denounced as "psychologically cruel, unacceptable and abusive" the lengths the Brethren were taking to discourage the children from seeing their father. He declared the children, the mother and witnesses against the father had all been subjected to pressure from the sect. He threatened fines and imprisonment if this did not end.

Benjamin addressed the elders of the sect: "A review of the authorities shows that these difficulties have been going on for 30 years under the Family Law Act. It must surely not be beyond your intellect and wit to find a dimension in your beliefs so that they may reconcile with the law of this country and the need for children to know both of their parents."

Three weeks later their father sat in his car in a Launceston suburb as the police tried in vain to persuade his son and daughter to join him. The arrival of the law calmed things down at the house, but the children would not budge. After two hours the father drove away with their suitcases still in the boot. Within days he had begun proceedings to have the orders of the Family Court enforced. And the Brethren leadership mobilised: a \$50,000 fund was set up to challenge Benjamin's orders, and the world leader of the sect flew down to Tasmania.

Bruce Hales has gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid being photographed in the 18 months since the



His master's voice ... Tony McCorkell.

Photo: *Kate Geraghty*

Exclusive Brethren became big news. He has outwitted snappers from Fairfax, News Ltd and the television networks even though we all know where he lives on Sydney's lower North Shore, and where he works at his prosperous office fit-out business in Ermington. But his precautions came unstuck in Launceston.

On January 24 Hales took a private jet to Tasmania. He says he was flying down for Bible study classes, but his visit included a meeting with the mother of those two children. When his Cessna Citation landed, the scene caught the attention of a local plane spotter. A car, two vans and about 10 men were clustered round the jet when a fat man in a white shirt climbed down onto the tarmac. The plane spotter got the first pictures for years of the man known to the faithful as the Elect Vessel, the Man of God and Mr Bruce.

Whatever else can be said about this man, Hales has put the Brethren in the news. Before he inherited the leader's mantle from his father, this prosperous sect of about 40,000 members was barely known. But in 2004 Hales instigated a dramatic break with the past by taking the sect into "worldly" politics. Brethren fortunes have since been spent campaigning for the re-election of John Howard and George Bush; against same-sex marriage legislation around the world; against Helen Clark in New Zealand and against the Greens on both sides of the Tasman.

The Brethren did what they could to cover their tracks, but since the pattern of sect politicking became clear 18 months ago the cult has found itself in the spotlight. These strange people with their strange rules - no voting, no eating with outsiders, no university, no shorts ("God has no pleasure in the legs of a man"), no films, no radio, no television, no internet and no mobile phones - were objects of public, and increasingly hostile, curiosity.

A network of "out" Brethren was waiting to help the media. They have lost their families, their friends and usually their businesses when the sect closed its doors behind them. They have emerged, like prisoners after serving time, to make a fresh start in the world. Almost all are men. They talk of hopeless fights in the Family Court for contact with their children, and of grandchildren they may never see. "I think," one said to me cautiously, "I have four grandsons."

Scrutiny has brought troubles for the sect on a number of fronts. The Man of God, to counter "non-factual and ill-informed information about the Exclusive Brethren Church", has appointed a fresh spokesman who promises more candid access to the cult. Young and heavy-set, Tony McCorkell was thrown out of the Brethren with his whole family when he was eight. "The MoG doesn't see me as being excommunicated," he explained. "He sees me as an innocent victim of my father."

McCorkell's big news is that the Brethren are not going to campaign in the coming federal election as they did in the last. "Their biggest fear was Mark Latham because they thought they were going to lose funding for their schools under Latham. That was the big problem.

"This year they don't have that threat. And they quite like Kevin Rudd because he claims to be a Christian. I don't think it supports John over Kevin this year. I think it's more: well either one, we don't mind. But they didn't want Latham because Latham was a threat to their schools."

The sect's tiny schools are controversial because the Brethren frown on computers, the internet, sex education, evolution and universities. Fewer than 1500 students are enrolled across Australia, but the cost to the Commonwealth is running at roughly \$5 million a year. McCorkell's view is that the

Brethren's surprise 2004 entry into "worldly" politics — for more than 150 years believers have been forbidden to vote — was essentially to defend that funding stream.

But the MoG doesn't like the tactics his people are using. "He expresses regret for New Zealand," McCorkell reports. "He reckons that's just a nightmare. That's ridiculous. That's terrible ... They went too far."

What does he mean by that? "I think it was the hiring of private investigators, because it brought a bit of flak. With regards to Tasmania, they regret having masks and being disorganised and having false addresses and all that sort of stuff."

Brethren fight dirty. In the New Zealand election in 2005 they hired a private detective to hunt for scandal in the lives of Labour MPs including the Prime Minister, Helen Clark. In the Tasmanian election last year they gave fake and misleading addresses on advertisements and pamphlets, and had anti-Greens billboards towed through the streets of Hobart by men wearing freak masks.

We won't see any of that this year, says McCorkell. "Suffice to say they're not going to do the same this year. They're not getting involved like they did last time. They're just keeping a low profile at this election."

In a statement issued late last week he repeated the old claim that believers were acting individually and spontaneously.

"The Church does not dictate to individual members on matters such as these; the Brethren's first line of defence at all times is very extensive prayer, he said."

But the sect is not out of the woods on these issues. The Australian Electoral Commission is continuing to investigate the Brethren's role in the last federal election. It accepts that a company set up by a Brethren businessman in 2004 was the sole source of nearly \$400,000 spent by various members of the sect on that year's campaign. But according to a statement issued yesterday to the *Herald*, it "continues to examine other disclosure matters that came to the AEC's notice during the inquiry into Exclusive Brethren".

In Tasmania the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Sarah Bolt, has until the end of next month to decide whether she will subpoena all the relevant financial records of the state and federal Liberal Party, the Exclusive Brethren and the party's advertising agency, Master Advertising, to discover who funded three newspaper advertisements placed by the Brethren in last year's state election.

First up they were paid for by the Liberal Party. The party's state director, Damien Mantach, and advertising agent, Chris Guesdon, both said this was "an administrative bungle" but they will not say who ultimately footed the bill. Nor will the party, nor will the Brethren. McCorkell said: "We simply do not know the details of who paid for what, as the church was not a party to it."

In Canberra the Greens leader, Bob Brown, is once again trying to persuade his fellow senators to investigate the sect. His latest motion will come to a vote next week, but it is not looking good. Labor is making up its mind, but the Democrats are uncomfortable that the focus would be on one church only. They are proposing, instead, a Senate inquiry into the abuse by any church of exemptions granted on the basis of religious belief.

Brown condemns that approach as timid. "The Exclusive Brethren has entered into the political arena in a way quite different to any other faith, and the inquiry is to investigate that difference and open it to people who have knowledge of that, including ex-Brethren."

The Brethren, in turn, accuse Brown of electioneering. Late in the week McCorkell issued a statement declaring Brown's timing suspicious. "I suggest it demonstrates Brown's political agenda, and his attempt to bully Brethren members into silence. Brown should focus on policy, not payback."

Last Tuesday Justice Benjamin of the Family Court declared he would have no more bullying from the sect to undermine his orders. He called into court the mother, the children and local Brethren and declared the steps they had taken to prevent the father's contact in mid-January were "extraordinary and appalling". Benjamin entirely rejected claims that it was of their own volition that the children had refused to go with their father.

He sentenced the mother and the two men who had stood guard on the veranda to four months' jail - suspended on condition that his contact orders are complied with for the following year. "These children," he said, "are entitled to have a relationship with their father."

That is a proposition that challenges the triple power of the Man of God to expel sect members from family, faith and business. With the assistance of the Brethren fighting fund, the mother is now mounting a wide-ranging appeal against Benjamin's rulings.

But the next round of this 30-year battle is close: the children are due to spend a week with their father in their next school holidays.

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