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Campaigning but refusing to vote borders on hypocrisy

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'We do not mix in politics; we are not of the world; we do not vote,' stated John Nelson Darby, the founder of the Brethren Church. The practice of vote abstinence continues, but the Brethren are mixing in politics, becoming God's lobbyists and significant political campaign funders.

The lobbying and campaign contributions of the Exclusive Brethren have generated considerable interest in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Accusations of smear campaigns conducted by the Brethren dominated the last New Zealand election. Similar accusations were made by the Greens after the recent Tasmanian election. There have been questions about the Brethren's financial contributions to both Liberal and Nationals candidates in the 2004 federal election, with contributions estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Allegations have also been made about establishing companies to funnel money to political parties without the Brethren identified as the donors.

But this funding is not a new form of Christian charity. The Brethren, like any other lobbyists, are buying access to politicians and influencing policy. The Brethren have approached state and federal incumbents and candidates to promote their conservative brand of Christianity. Their platform is anti-homosexuality, anti-single-parent families and anti-interventionist government. They have reportedly made gains in industrial relations laws, being able to exclude union officials from members' businesses without consulting staff. The Brethren also receive substantial funding for their schools.

Their campaign tactics are organised and targeted. While they claim there is no co-ordination from the church, they seem not only to be able to raise money but also to organise members to conduct extensive mailbox drops.

In the federal electorate of Calare in western NSW in the 2004 election the Brethren supported the National Party candidate and Baptist minister, Robert Griffith. Members of the Brethren showed Griffith drafts of a pamphlet they intended to deliver to households promoting him. However, when the Brethren's support became known, Griffith was heavily criticised by media and his opponents. Voters in Calare seemed to prefer a separation of church and state, and in hindsight the Brethren's involvement probably did Griffith more harm than good.

But this has not dampened the efforts of the Brethren or politicians. In both the NSW and federal elections we will hear of more campaign contributions and Brethren-supported candidates.

But the Brethren's contributions carry a commandment: funds cannot be used for television or radio advertising, a condition that stems from their principle of separation, which was established to keep worldly practices from "defiling" members. Such worldly practices include watching television, listening to radio, owning a computer or eating with anyone not a member of the Brethren. Yet it seems odd for people so wary of the corrupting influences of the secular world to not only involve themselves in politics, but also make their campaign contributions through a third party. This borders on hypocrisy

considering the Brethren's refusal to vote.

This refusal is based on the notion of ordained rule, which stems from biblical passages such as Romans 13:1, "... the powers that be are ordained of God". Since it is God who ordains our rulers, they argue, a member could unknowingly vote against God's chosen party.

Why is voting an act against God, yet lobbying is not? One possible reply is that although the Brethren may not know who God wishes to install as ruler, they have a good idea who God does not want in power. If God is against homosexual marriage, it would be reasonable to suggest God would not want the Greens in power since they are for homosexual marriage. Such a rationale might explain why the Brethren find it acceptable to lobby against the Greens, but not vote for another party.

If God does install governments, why did Canada legalise such marriages?

The question that should be posed to the Exclusive Brethren is why God favours backroom deals to the voting booth. If they cannot provide a suitable explanation then perhaps the Australian Electoral Commission should reconsider the validity of the Brethren's objection to voting.

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