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Police investigate Brethren ad spree

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THE Exclusive Brethren sect faces a police investigation over its huge advertising spending in favour of John Howard and the Liberal Party at the last election.

It is expected the Australian Electoral Commission will announce today that it is referring to federal police questions over whether sect members have fully disclosed their involvement in the campaign.

For 16 months the commission has been investigating the source of funds used to pay for ads and leaflets worth \$370,000 in Mr Howard's electorate, Bennelong, and in South Australia and Tasmania, before the election. The ads were pro-Liberal, pro-Howard, and anti-Greens.

At the centre of the investigation is a \$10 private company, Willmac Enterprises, which was set up three weeks before the election by the Sydney pump salesman Mark Mackenzie, a member of the Christian sect.

The company's spending on leaflets, ads and direct mail put it in the top five spenders among "third party" election campaigners. Willmac spent 10 times Right to Life's expenditure (\$30,555), doubled the spending of the Australian Conservation Foundation (\$127,099), and outspent the Wilderness Society (\$229,073).

Some ads were authorised by Stephen Hales, the brother of the sect's world leader, "Elect Vessel" Bruce D. Hales. The address given was the Brethren-run school in Meadowbank.

An initial commission report found "no evidence that Willmac Enterprises received any gifts or donations from other sources that contributed to the costs of the advertisements and pamphlets".

Mr Mackenzie and the Exclusive Brethren's leadership restated that yesterday. A spokesman for Mr Mackenzie said all the funds came from "business earnings, not donations, but from income generated through business activity".

A Brethren spokesman, Tony McCorkell, said: "The church organisation is not a stakeholder in the entity Willmac, so I cannot see why it would be involved [in an investigation] ... With a federal election around the corner, the timing of this development could only be described as curious and rather astounding."

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