

Brethren still a cult in Rudd's book

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KEVIN RUDD considers the Exclusive Brethren an "extremist cult" that breaks up families and is bad for Australia.

He has rejected its requests in the past for a meeting and said yesterday he had no intention of changing that policy.

John Howard considers the secretive religious sect a "legal legitimate organisation" and said there was nothing untoward about meeting them.

Peter Costello, who has also met the Brethren on occasions, agrees. "This is no crime. In fact the crime would be if a Member of Parliament refused to meet someone on the basis of their religious convictions."

Labor and the Government had daggers drawn over the Exclusive Brethren yesterday after it emerged Mr Howard met a delegation of its leaders in his Parliament House office two weeks ago.

The Brethren bans its members from voting, forbids its women from going to university and does not allow the use of computers.

It contributed \$370,000 to help Mr Howard get re-elected in Bennelong at the 2004 election.

At the August 8 meeting was Mark McKenzie, a Sydney pump salesman, whose former company Willmac funded the pro-Howard advertising. This spending was referred by the Australian Electoral Commission to the Federal Police, which is still investigating.

Others present included the sect's "Elect Vessel", Bruce Hales, his brother Stephen and elder Warwick John.

Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese said the meeting was highly suspicious. "Exclusive Brethren don't believe in voting but do believe in interfering in election campaigns, and they have a history not only of covert funding and also engaging in personal attacks and smears against non-extreme right-wing conservative candidates," he said.

"Increasingly, [we see] a desperate Prime Minister who is prepared to associate even with sect organisations like Exclusive Brethren in order to hold onto his seat."

Mr Howard said funding was a matter between the Liberal Party and the Brethren but there was nothing wrong with him meeting them.

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