

Brethren secretive on funds source: claim

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THE Exclusive Brethren have consistently covered up the source of funds for their huge pro-John Howard advertising campaign at the last election, it was alleged last night.

The ABC's *Four Corners* revealed that, in three months surrounding the 2004 federal election, the Brethren elder and parliamentary lobbyist Warwick John deposited \$340,000, mostly in cash, into the bank account of Willmac Enterprises, the company that funded the campaign.

It was part of a total \$375,000 injected into the business over the period. Willmac did not declare the donations to the Australian Electoral Commission. Whether it should have is being investigated by the Australian Federal Police.

The Brethren have always maintained that the campaign funds came from the earnings of the company, which was set up weeks before election day.

The program said it had seen evidence of six major cash deposits from Mr John - the biggest for \$120,000. Mr John was not employed by Willmac, nor was he a director. In a statement, he denied he had made any donations, saying this was "a complete fallacy".

The program also described a huge international flow of money cash, nick-named the "Brethren Express" in which members ferry money in envelopes across borders for unknown purposes.

But the sect's world leader, Bruce Hales, said in a statement: "Suggestions by *Four Corners* that there is a co-ordinated campaign by the Exclusive Brethren Church to spirit large sums of cash around the world in breach of Australian laws are completely false. There is no illegality and there is no evidence of illegality."

Melbourne's *Age* yesterday revealed Mr John was one of two Brethren lobbyists in Parliament House whose access pass was sponsored by two Liberal backbenchers.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, has maintained his strong support for the Exclusive Brethren, and has defended his meetings with them.

Mr John's statement describes their most recent meeting, on August 8. It says, in part: "There was no agenda for the meeting and nothing critical was discussed only economic matters in general. Mr Howard is always interested in how small business is faring, and there was a brief discussion about TV shows concerning the Brethren. Mr Howard did not approve of the public vilification of the Brethren as a Christian church ... There was no discussion or mention whatsoever of Willmac Enterprises or the [federal police]."

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