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## Sect thanked minister over schools

Michael Bachelard  
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MORE evidence has emerged of the power of the Exclusive Brethren's lobbying in Canberra, with the sect's world leader giving thanks for the "unexpected recognition" from former federal education minister Brendan Nelson.

*The Age* has obtained a 2004 passage of Brethren "ministry" — transcribed words of Sydney-based world leader Bruce D. Hales and other sect figures — in which they discuss their schools.

"(The schools were) set up to deliver the young people from the world," Mr Hales told followers on July 24, 2004.

"We don't want to go back to it, we don't want to be stupid enough to go back to the world, otherwise the Lord might take away our liberties, might take away what the Government has given us. The Government is very favourable; been favourable to us this week, hasn't it, Mr David?"

Another senior Brethren man, David Stewart, replies: "Yes, very clearly. ... Very ready support from the Minister for Education."

Mr Hales: "Yes, well, we need to be thankful for it. You get the unexpected recognition of what the saints (the Brethren) represent. You don't expect it, and then they give it to you, they're compelled to give it to you."

Mr Hales' words make it clear that Brethren lobbyists, including Mr Stewart, had met then education minister Dr Nelson in the preceding days.

The Education Department has confirmed that, during 2004, Dr Nelson had representations from the Brethren, and agreed to give them an exemption from testing the computer literacy of year 6 and year 10 students.

That year, computer literacy was made a condition of Federal Government funding of private schools, but at the time the Brethren shunned computers, believing them to be instruments of the devil.

Brethren spokesman Tony McCorkell said yesterday that the ministry reference merely recognised the responsive hearing given to the delegation by Dr Nelson at the 2004 meeting.

He said the Brethren's concern at the time had been that paperwork associated with its private schools would need to be lodged with the department electronically. Dr Nelson assured them they could still lodge returns on paper.

Brethren are now allowed to use computers on a restricted basis.

Dr Nelson did not respond to queries yesterday.

The Brethren received \$6.6 million in federal school funding in 2005.

Meanwhile, a Brethren elder, Phillip McNaughton, has suggested on Sydney radio that the sect is relaxing its insistence that those who have left the sect have no contact with their families.

"I would have thought they would be able to speak to them," he said.

But Ron Fawkes, a former Australian leader of the sect, who has not seen any of his six children for 22 years, said Mr McNaughton was being "very, very casual with the truth".

"Parents right around the world haven't been able to see their families," he said.

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