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Police to probe sect support for PM

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Electoral officials have asked the Australian Federal Police to investigate federal election advertising by a \$10 company set up by an Exclusive Brethren member.

Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) funding and disclosure director Kevin Bodel said he sent a brief of information about Willmac Enterprises to the AFP on Tuesday.

And Mr Bodel confirmed today's exclusive report in *The Age* that Willmac spent \$370,000 on pro-Liberal and anti-Greens advertisements and leaflets in Tasmania, South Australia and Prime Minister John Howard's Sydney seat of Bennelong before the 2004 election.

The Age reported that Willmac was set up just before the election by Sydney pump salesman Mark Mackenzie, a member of the reclusive sect.

The company's spending on leaflets, advertisements and direct mail put it in the top five biggest spenders among "third party" election campaigners.

Willmac spent 10 times the amount spent by Right to Life (\$30,555), more than doubled the spending of the Australian Conservation Foundation (\$127,099), and even outspent the Wilderness Society (\$229,073). The company was quietly deregistered again 18 months later.

Mr Bodel was today tight-lipped about the extent of the AFP investigation into Willmac.

"It doesn't relate to the expenditure disclosure lodged by Willmac after the last election," Mr Bodel told a Senate estimates committee hearing.

"That third party disclosure of electoral expenditure is correct. That probably is about as far as I can go," Mr Bodel said.

"We pursued a line of inquiry and reached a point where we believed it would be better handled by the AFP, and at that point we referred the matter on, having collected a degree of evidence."

Australian Electoral Commissioner Ian Campbell took a series of questions from Australian Greens senator Bob Brown on notice, saying he did not want to compromise any police investigation.

Exclusive Brethren spokesman Tony McCorkell told *The Age* said the organisation was not a stakeholder in Willmac, therefore would not be involved in the AFP investigation.

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Pro-Howard advertising paid for by Willmac Enterprises.

But authorisations for some of the election material were linked to the Exclusive Brethren, *The Age* reported.

A spokesman for Mr Mackenzie told *The Age* Willmac's funds came from "business earnings, not donations, but from income generated through business activity".

AAP

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