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Brethren leader hits back at Rudd

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THE Exclusive Brethren's elect vessel, or world leader, has stepped up his verbal brawl with Kevin Rudd by issuing his first direct comments to the media, rejecting the Opposition Leader's criticisms.

Sydney businessman Bruce Hales, who leads the secretive sect of about 40,000 devotees, hit back at comments by Mr Rudd on Wednesday that the church was "an extremist cult" that "breaks up families".

Mr Hales said those comments were "not factual, they were not informed, and it seems to us they were deliberately intended to put the Brethren in an unfair light for political purposes".

Mr Rudd said through a spokesman that he would "not be intimidated by the Exclusive Brethren" and that he stood by "everything he said, 100 per cent".

The war of words is likely to goad the sect into another expensive campaign for Prime Minister John Howard, whom they consider one of the "Christian men in Government" — and for the Brethren, money is no object.

The dispute started when *The Age* revealed that Mr Hales, accompanied by three senior Brethren figures, met Mr Howard in Canberra two weeks ago.

Willmac, a company owned by one of the men at the meeting, Mark Mackenzie, paid for \$370,000 of pro-Howard advertising in the Prime Minister's seat of Bennelong and elsewhere at the 2004 federal election.

That company is now under investigation by the Australian Federal Police for its electoral activities.

Describing himself as the "church leader", Mr Hales said in his statement that Mr Rudd had "failed to respond without citing any reasons" to a number of requests to meet Brethren leaders.

"If we cannot explain ourselves to him and he will not inform himself properly about what we believe and practise, how can he have a realistic idea of who we are and what we do?" Mr Hales said.

"The Brethren is a recognised church. The church organisation does not participate in politics and members abstain from voting based on their individual conscience.



Bruce Hales, who leads the 40,000 members of the Exclusive Brethren, says Kevin Rudd's comments are 'not factual'.

"Individual members are free to support causes or principles in which they believe," he said.

The Brethren has consistently argued that, despite its members funding conservative election campaigns in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and Sweden, the church did not involve itself in politics.

Mr Hales also denied the police investigation into Willmac had anything to do with the church, even though it was a company directed and owned by a Brethren man, its advertisements were authorised by Brethren figures and used properties that included church-owned schools.

"We regard these repeated allegations as a very public slur against the church and its members," Mr Hales said.

The church's leader also rejected Mr Rudd's comment that Brethren schools had "real problems with the provision of modern education" because of a general ban on computers.

Mr Hales said the church's schools had "IT facilities and audio-visual equipment" — a point *The Age* can confirm, having toured a Brethren school in Sydney earlier this year.

"We encourage education and our children have retention in years 11 and 12," Mr Hales said.

But Mr Hales did not respond to all Mr Rudd's other questions, including how much money the church had given the Liberal Party, and what undertakings were given at Mr Howard's meeting with Mr Hales.

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