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Two MPs sponsor Brethren lobbyists

By Michael Bachelard

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Two senior elders of the Exclusive Brethren sect have gained permanent access to Federal Parliament, as lobbyists, under the sponsorship of two Howard Government MPs.

The Age has discovered that Sydney-based elders Stephen Hales and Warwick John were issued lobbyists' passes after being vouched for by former minister Danna Vale and the member for the Tasmanian seat of Bass, Michael Ferguson.

Mr Hales, a Sydney businessman, is the brother of Bruce D. Hales, who leads the world-wide sect of 40,000 devotees.

The Age has also confirmed the church has retained Liberal-connected public relations firm Jackson Wells Morris to provide them with political advice and deal with "hostile media".

A Four Corners report on ABC TV tonight will reveal further details of the secretive religious sect's attempts, since 2004, to secure the election of conservative politicians world-wide - including massive flows of money, advertising and phone canvassing.

The political activism comes despite the sect's strict rules of separation from the world, which mean members do not vote in elections.

The lobbyist passes allow Mr Hales and Mr John access to the offices of ministers and backbenchers, and both attended the Brethren's controversial meeting with John Howard in his prime ministerial office in early August.

The meeting was also attended by Bruce Hales, known as the Man of God, or the Elect Vessel, and another Brethren man, Mark Mackenzie, the director of a company that funnelled \$370,000 into pro-Howard advertising at the last election. That spending is now under investigation by the Australian Federal Police.

One of the Brethren lobbyists' sponsors, Ms Vale, the member for Hughes in NSW, is a key Howard backer and former minister for veterans' affairs. She has come to prominence for, among other things, her comments that Australia was becoming a Muslim nation by "aborting ourselves almost out of existence". Her spokesman said she had sponsored Mr John "because he's a constituent".

Mr Ferguson is a committed Christian who owes victory in his seat of Bass in the 2004 election to Mr Howard's pledge to save the Tasmanian forest industry. He holds it by a slender 2.7 per cent margin.

A Brethren spokesman told The Age that "many churches have members who hold lobbyists' passes for parliaments, to allow them to advocate for issues and on matters of conscience and morality".

A statement from Jackson Wells Morris said the company "has provided advice to the Brethren on how to deal with some of the issues they face and to engage with a hostile media".

"In recent years, sections of the media have subjected the Brethren to unwarranted scrutiny bordering on harassment. It has been a witch- hunt. If the Brethren had been given a fair hearing they would be much better understood, like any other church or religious organisation."

Bob Lawrence, who handles the Brethren account for the PR firm, has worked for senior ministers Helen Coonan and Joe Hockey. He also worked for Liberal Party campaign headquarters in 2004.

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