

Brethren 'lied' on cash for ads

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THE Exclusive Brethren has consistently lied about the source of funds for its massive pro-John Howard advertising campaign at the last election, it was alleged last night.

The ABC's *Four Corners* program revealed that, in three months surrounding the 2004 federal election, 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.

The donations were not declared to the Australian Electoral Commission by Willmac's director, Mark Mackenzie, and are now being investigated by federal police.

Brethren members have always maintained that the massive campaign funds came from the earnings of the company, even though it was set up only weeks before election day.

But the *Four Corners* program said it had seen evidence of six major cash deposits from Mr John — the biggest for \$120,000 — even though he was not employed by Willmac, nor was he a director.

In a statement, Mr John categorically denied that he had made any donations, saying it was "a complete fallacy". The program also described a massive international flow of 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 D. 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."

He said the church was "being persecuted because of its beliefs".

The Age revealed yesterday that Mr John was one of two Brethren lobbyists in Federal Parliament House whose access pass was sponsored by two Liberal backbenchers.

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

Mr John's statement describes their most recent meeting, on August 8, revealing the apparent familiarity of the church's leaders with the Prime Minister.

"I was in Canberra and I greeted Mr Howard and inquired from him whether Mr Hales could meet him for a short discussion," Mr John's statement reads.

"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 ... No commitments or promises as to campaign support were discussed or agreed upon."

The ease of access contrasts with that of the former president of the Uniting Church, Dean Drayton.

Dr Drayton said he had tried on about four occasions to arrange meetings with the PM both as president of his church, and representative of the National Council of Churches, which represents 4 million people. He sought meetings on subjects such as asylum seekers and WorkChoices, but "there was no real response from the Prime Minister's department".

"I'm very surprised that the Exclusive Brethren have been able to meet so often with the Prime Minister," Dr Drayton said.

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