

## Brethren children 'abused'

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FORMER Family Court chief justice Alastair Nicholson has accused the Exclusive Brethren church of brainwashing and abusing children by denying them access to their non-Brethren parents.

Mr Nicholson also accused it of failing to comply with court orders, of stacking Family Court rooms with supporters to intimidate opponents, of using their almost unlimited legal funds to "conduct appeals no matter how hopeless", and of "unacceptable" comments about being above the law.

A Brethren spokesman rejected all the comments, saying church members sought to "uphold the law at all times".

The Exclusive Brethren, which has contributed millions of dollars to conservative political campaigns, including the re-election of Prime Minister John Howard in 2004, practices a policy of separation from the world, which includes keeping children from parents who are out of the fellowship.

Non-Brethren parents have for decades fought bruising Family Court battles to try to get access to their children.

Mr Nicholson, who retired in 2004 after 16 years as head of the Family Court, revealed last year that he had been visited by two delegations of Exclusive Brethren elders trying to persuade him to help them keep families apart.

Brethren children often tell their non-Brethren parent as part of custody disputes that they are evil and that they do not want to spend time with them.

"You'd have to be highly suspicious that, if not coached, that the children had in effect been brainwashed into believing that they shouldn't see the other parent," he said in an interview with the ABC's *Four Corners*, which did not go to air. "To treat children in that way is abusive of them, and it's psychologically very damaging to the child. It's in effect telling the child that their parent is worthless ... and that really is quite unacceptable."

Mr Nicholson said church members were "reluctant to comply with court orders", which "had to be enforced with vigour".

A church spokesman rejected the comments, saying the Brethren encouraged members to abide by custody rulings. There were "numerous cases where joint custody arrangements are working smoothly".

In 2003, world leader Bruce D. Hales told a Brethren gathering that "I can't exactly expect to get mercy in the judicial system" and the Brethren church was "the highest court" that had "the power to overrule other judgements".

Mr Nicholson said it was "obviously not acceptable in a democratic society for people to treat themselves as above the law", although it was not an uncommon view among strictly religious people.

The Brethren said Mr Hales' comment was a "theological reference ... that moral and spiritual matters are dealt

with by the church, despite these issues not always being considered in a court of law".

Labor spokesman Anthony Albanese wants the Howard Government to "disclose all of the financial and other support they have received from the Exclusive Brethren" for November's election.

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