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PM-Brethren letters held until after poll

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JOHN Howard has exchanged letters five times with the Exclusive Brethren since 2003, but after 14 months of stalling on a simple freedom-of-information request, his office will not release the correspondence until well after election day.

The Age was informed last week that it was authorised to receive edited copies of four letters from members of the secretive sect to the Prime Minister, and one from the Prime Minister to the Brethren sent as recently as September last year.

But the release was delayed by another 30 days to give the Brethren a chance to appeal against the decision, taking the earliest date of receipt of the correspondence to December 13 — three weeks after voters decide if Mr Howard will remain Prime Minister.

It is the first time the Prime Minister's office has acknowledged any correspondence with the religious sect with which the Prime Minister has had very close contact over many years. Mr Howard was embarrassed in August when *The Age* revealed he had met Brethren world leader, Bruce Hales, and at least one sect member who is under police investigation over his role in funding pro-Liberal campaign advertisements in the 2004 election.

Greens leader Bob Brown said the Government had once again manipulated the FoI Act to hide information. Mr Brown was told by the Prime Minister's department, in response to his own FoI request in 2005, that "no records of correspondence with persons identifying as representatives of the Exclusive Brethren ... were located". The response to *The Age* reveals that three relevant documents existed.

"I was lied to. That's clear. Straight deception," Senator Brown said. "But I'm used to it with the Government."

The *Age* FoI saga dates back to September 29 last year, when the paper requested any communications between Mr Howard and members of the Exclusive Brethren. After a number of clarifications were requested, the last in February, months elapsed with no action.

In May, however, after further prompting, Mr Howard's "senior adviser (Government)", Andrew Kefford, who was the decision maker in the request, responded that the search for documents was complete. A 30-day consultation period with "third parties" (the Brethren) would begin at that time.

In June *The Age* was asked to pay \$623.90 which was paid four weeks later. In September, two months after the money was paid, the department said it was "finalising consultations".

On October 26, after further prompting, *The Age* was told that Mr Kefford, was "conscious of the delay and has indicated that he expects to consider the matter over the weekend".

The following Monday, Mr Kefford said more consultation was needed — a process that continued until November 12, when the decision was delivered — including the 30-day appeal period.

Mr Howard's spokeswoman Nicki Savva denied that the Government had stalled the request to save the Prime Minister embarrassment before the election.

"That is rejected absolutely ... there has been no politicisation of the charges. The proof of that is in the handing over of the letters," she said.

Ms Savva said no documents had been revealed as a result of Senator Brown's request, because he had not named the correct members of the Brethren who wrote the correspondence.

Ms Savva also tried to blame *The Age* for the delays.

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