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Sect joins Tasmania campaign

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RELIGIOUS sect the Exclusive Brethren has dramatically intervened in the federal election campaign with a letter sent "to the citizens of Tasmania" warning about the "anti-development and immoral policies" of Greens leader Bob Brown.

The letter will intensify the feud between the Brethren and the Greens, which started after the sect ran secret advertising campaigns against the party at previous state and federal elections.

But media and political pressure on the church over the past two years to identify itself in electoral advertisements has paid off — the letter names 48 male and three female sect members, saying they are "members of a Christian group commonly known as the Exclusive Brethren".

Church members do not vote and, in the past, have produced hundreds of thousands of dollars of pro-John Howard political advertising while obscuring the source of the funds. The Tasmanian letter complains about "many unfair statements" made by Senator Brown inside parliament and in the media, saying he has tried twice to instigate a senate inquiry into the sect.

It says Senator Brown, who faces re-election this Saturday, has "actively and persistently vilified a religious Christian minority".

The letter refers readers to the Greens and Brethren websites, but also to an anonymous US-registered blog at www.greenswatch.com.

The site accuses the Greens of a belief in bestiality, of starting the race riots on Palm Island in 2004, and of "plotting to infiltrate the Exclusive Brethren".

A Brethren spokesman told *The Age* the letter was written because church members felt it was "time to speak out against the venomous attacks that continue to be made by Senator Brown".

Senator Brown said the letter was the pay-off for John Howard from a meeting with the Brethren's world leader, Bruce Hales, in the Prime Minister's Parliament House office in August.

"I think the church's members are pouring hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars into this campaign ... and under the Government's new electoral laws, an individual can put in \$100,000 around the country without any disclosure being made," he said.

The second Tasmanian Greens senator, Christine Milne, said there was a "high correlation" between advertising from the Liberals, the religious right and the timber lobby in the state.

But the Brethren spokesman denied any input from the Liberal Party. Any donation to political parties was "a private matter and is not related to (members') life in the church".

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