

Brethren in ALP's firing line

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LABOR has launched an offensive against the Exclusive Brethren, asking four federal agencies to investigate the sect's activities.

The ALP has also revealed that, early in the election campaign, a Brethren member tried to donate cash to a Labor candidate in an apparent bid to undermine Kevin Rudd's stated opposition to the sect. The donation was rejected.

Exclusive Brethren spokesman Tony McCorkell dismissed Labor's move as "a vicious and intolerant attack on a religious minority that ill-becomes any political party in a democratic society".

He said the group had nothing to hide, and would co-operate with any investigation.

The sect has been a good friend to Prime Minister John Howard, meeting with him a number of times, exchanging letters, praying for him and pumping more than \$370,000 into his re-election bid in 2004.

ALP national secretary Tim Gartrell late last month referred allegations to the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Taxation Office, the Australian Electoral Commission and Austrac, which investigates large financial transfers.

The allegations are that the Brethren failed to declare the transfer of large sums of money across borders under the Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorist Financing Act 2006 and the Financial Transactions Reports Act 1987, that it made false declarations about domestic financial transactions, that it used false names in election advertising material and that it used a front company, "Willmac", to avoid strict electoral donation requirements.

The AFP has responded that the allegations are "under evaluation".

The ABC's *Four Corners* program reported last month that cash deposits of up to \$120,000 in a Sydney bank account had helped fund advertising to assist Mr Howard's re-election. It is unclear if those deposits were declared to Austrac.

Labor has also revealed that its campaign headquarters warned candidates against accepting any donation from people unknown to them after catching a member of the Exclusive Brethren trying to give \$250 to a candidate in an electorate in the centre-west of NSW.

Mr Rudd publicly repudiated the Brethren in August, saying it was an "extremist cult" that "breaks up families".

Labor's Anthony Albanese said yesterday there was a need "to get to the bottom of the Exclusive Brethren's shadowy links and donations to Australian politics".

Mr McCorkell said any investigation would clear the religious group.

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