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Rudd in Brethren inquiry about-face

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PRIME Minister Kevin Rudd has rejected the pleas of former members of the Exclusive Brethren for a broad-ranging inquiry into the sect, saying such an investigation would "unreasonably interfere" with their right "to practise their faith freely and openly".

Yet, before the election last year, Mr Rudd described the Brethren as an "extremist cult" whose activities "break up families" and, in the days leading up to the November election, he called on four federal agencies — the police, the tax office, the Australian Electoral Commission and anti-money-laundering agency Austrac — to investigate their activities.

Former members of the Brethren seized on the comments and, in February, wrote to Mr Rudd asking for an inquiry, particularly into its "disproportionately high taxpayer funding of Brethren schools, dishonest political campaigning, their charitable status in relation to rate and tax exemptions, and their well-known intimidatory tactics during traumatic Family Court cases".

The letter was written by former Brethren member Peter Flinn and signed by 33 others. Attached were 13 stories outlining the misery inflicted by practices of the sect, including the doctrine of separation, which keeps lapsed members from contacting their families.

Mr Rudd's chief-of-staff David Epstein wrote in reply last week that the Prime Minister "does not resile from the views he expressed last year," and that he "remains concerned about the reported imposition of doctrines that weaken family bonds" and "prevent children accessing online learning tools".

Mr Epstein also added that religious observance "should not be regarded as a shield behind which breaches of the law can be hidden", and urged anyone with details of criminal behaviour within the Brethren to tell police.

However, he wrote, on religious freedom grounds, the Prime Minister would not be instituting an inquiry.

Mr Rudd's stance suggests the Government also will vote against a motion by Greens Senator Bob Brown calling for an inquiry into the sect, its tax concessions, public funding, and practices that may harm children or families.

Senator Brown tabled notice of the new motion, his third proposed inquiry into the Brethren, in the Senate on Thursday.

Senator Brown described Mr Rudd's position as "appalling", saying his priority "should be the welfare of children and families, and the taxpayers' money that is going to this organisation".

But Mr Flinn told *The Sunday Age* the Exclusive Brethren could take no comfort from Mr Rudd's response: "Whilst Mr Rudd did not give a specific commitment to an inquiry, he acknowledged the 'moving personal accounts'."

Mr Flinn also pointed out that Mr Rudd reiterated his Government's commitment to "enhancing transparency in the Australian electoral system, with reforms recently announced relating to the disclosure and sources of donations".

"We have no desire to interfere with the fundamental right of any religious group to freely and openly practise its beliefs. We just want to highlight other equally fundamental human rights, such as access to family who remain Brethren members, a right callously denied by the Brethren," Mr Flinn said.

The Exclusive Brethren is a wealthy Christian-based group that practises a radical doctrine of separation from the world. Its leaders became very close to former Prime Minister John Howard over many years of lobbying and political activism, and, in 2004, they poured \$370,000 into his re-election campaign.

Under Mr Howard, Brethren schools enjoyed similar funding to schools for disabled and Aboriginal students, even though, by their own admission, Exclusive Brethren members are in the top echelon of income earners. Mr Rudd has continued the funding arrangements, worth \$50 million over the next four years.

A spokesman for the Exclusive Brethren could not be contacted.

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