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AFP to trace funding behind Brethren's election advertising

- *Matthew Denholm*
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MEMBERS of the Exclusive Brethren sect plan to continue to fund political advertising, despite facing a likely police investigation into alleged breaches of Australia's electoral laws.

The Australian Federal Police has received a brief from the Australian Electoral Commission relating to the financing of pro-Coalition and anti-Green advertising during the 2004 federal election campaign.

"If a formal referral is received, the AFP will conduct an evaluation to determine if an investigation is warranted," a spokesman said yesterday.

The AEC has examined funding of ads disclosed by a company run by Sydney Exclusive Brethren member Mark MacKenzie.

Mr MacKenzie's \$10 company, Willmac Enterprises, set up a week before the election and disbanded last year, spent about \$370,000 on ads in four states during the 2004 campaign.

These included ads supporting the re-election of John Howard in Bennelong, and anti-Greens ads and pamphlets published in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, some using the addresses of sect schools.

Section 305 of the federal Electoral Act requires those declaring spending on elections to disclose any donations or gifts by others used to fund such expenditure.

Last year, an AEC inquiry found no evidence to suggest that anyone other than Willmac had funded the ads.

But by February this year the AEC had discovered "new materials" and made further inquiries, including into the "issue of where (the) funding came from".

"We pursued a line of inquiry and reached a point where we believed it would be better handled by the AFP," commission funding and disclosure director Kevin Bodel told Senate Estimates hearings yesterday.

Mr MacKenzie, a Sydney pump salesman, would not comment yesterday.

The Brethren is a fundamentalist Christian group that shuns wider society and bans voting by followers.

However, its members have developed a reputation across the world for funding election ads supportive of conservative politicians and attacking progressives.

Greens senator Bob Brown said he hoped a police investigation would throw further light on how a company set up by a pump salesman for \$10 a week before the 2004 election could fund \$370,000 in election advertising.

"They disclaim that this is Exclusive Brethren-organised activity, whereas the evidence points to it being highly organised amongst members of the sect," Senator Brown said.

A pamphlet entitled Keep Howard in Bennelong was, for example, authorised by Stephen Hales, brother of Brethren sect leader Bruce Hales, and, like other ads in South Australia and Victoria, listed a Brethren school as the authorising address.

Brethren spokesman and Queensland public relations consultant Tony McCorkell insisted the sect had no involvement in any election advertisements.

However, he defended the right of sect members to continue funding such material. "As private taxpayers of Australia they can do what they like," he said.

The Australian revealed in January that the Liberal Party in Tasmania was billed for anti-Greens ads placed by Brethren members during last year's state election.

Liberal state director Damien Mantach insists this was an administrative error and that the party did not pay for the ads.

Additional reporting: Patricia Karvelas

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