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Big Brother

Friday, June 1, 2007

The latest paid defender of the shadowy Exclusive Brethren sect left a trail of debt during his sojourn in the Northern Territory. By Paul Toohey.



Ton McCorkell, Brisbane-based official spokesman of the Exclusive Brethren, turned up again last week. He was answering on behalf of the sect, whose members ran a pro-John Howard pamphlet campaign in the prime minister's seat of Bennelong in the lead-up to the 2004 election.

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It is claimed a \$10 company, Willmac, was set up by Brethren members to conceal their heavy spending in political advertising in Bennelong, and in South Australia and Tasmania. McCorkell has denied the Brethren was a stakeholder in Willmac. The Australian Electoral Commission has referred the matter to the Australian Federal Police.


McCorkell has been busy in New Zealand this year, defending the New Zealand chapter of the sect over allegations of sexual abuse and political interference against the government.

As questions are asked of the federal government's links to this obscure, deeply conservative and cashed-up group, there are also questions to be asked of McCorkell. *The Bulletin* has found numerous small businesspeople and associations who are owed money by him or his companies.



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McCorkell, 27, is a huge, engaging man who wins friends easily. He also loses them.

His Grosvenor McCorkell website promises "Straight and trusted advice and service" in international management and consultancy, with images of Hong Kong, London and Sydney. It boasts "talented and dynamic staff who are committed to providing comprehensive, timely and practical advice and service". McCorkell admitted he was, at this time, the only staffer.

He said he recently removed a photo from his website of himself with John Howard because "there was some comment about it from some ex-Exclusive Brethren people". He said it was "an old one, taken at a function back in 2003. I'm no big-time friend of the PM."

McCorkell's family was excommunicated from the Brethren when he was a boy but he said there is no bitterness. He was not a current member and worked for them as a contracted spokesman.

Before McCorkell arrived in the Northern Territory in late 2003, he'd acted as consultant or executive for the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) and the Australian Multiple Births Association (AMBA), both non-profit organisations. McCorkell took \$10,000 from AMBA, part of a federal grant, on the promise he would find more than that amount in sponsorship. He did not.

"Yes, the money for sponsorship is outstanding," he said. "That was McCorkell & Co. Morally, the money is owed and there's no dispute." After this was raised by *The Bulletin*, McCorkell contacted the AMBA and offered to pay on a "three-month plan".

As for the breastfeeding association, treasurer Dr Julie Smith provided this statement: "In response to your question about whether Mr Tony McCorkell ever repaid money owing to ABA and [trading company] MD [Mother's Direct] ... the answer is no, the money was never repaid. We sought unsuccessfully to pursue the debt and eventually wrote off an amount of around \$10,000. The matter was the subject of a formal complaint to ASIC."

McCorkell did not accept this was the case but was "happy to look into it".

In December 2003, McCorkell became CEO of Walangeri Ngumpinku community, better known as Yarralin, in the Victoria River District. An investigation by the NT government conducted after McCorkell left in 2005 included the following:

The council was supposed to meet monthly. Records identified minutes from only six meetings in 18 months and demonstrated "a serious lack of administrative control".

The Walangeri store, owned by the council, lost \$5000 a week while McCorkell was CEO. Deloitte auditors could give no reasons for the loss. The investigation's suggestions included "theft of monies or stock or both".

During one five-day visit to Knotts Crossing Resort in Katherine, in April 2005, "McCorkell spent \$1224 in the restaurant/bistro alone".

On April 4, 2005, a month before McCorkell resigned as CEO, he "raised council purchase orders with Harvey Norman in Darwin for linen, bedding, furniture and whitegoods to the value of \$15,059" that were delivered to his Darwin home.

The investigation concluded that McCorkell showed "weak administrative and financial skills that have resulted in serious losses to council and his personal integrity must be called into question

in relation to the misuse of substantial council funds for personal gain".

Debt collectors were brought in over the \$15,000 spent at Harvey Norman and in May 2006 a judgment was made against McCorkell in Darwin Magistrates Court. McCorkell has repaid most of that money.

McCorkell insists he had a written agreement with Yarralin that the council purchase orders would be billed to him, not the council. He said he wanted to take advantage of council trade discounts. Of the Knotts Crossing expenses, he says he went with "about five Aboriginal people. They would have eaten there and it would have gone to my bill".

As he was leaving Darwin, McCorkell said, he sold most of the Harvey Norman furniture to pay outstanding rent to his flat's owners.

Ron Strachan runs the National Flags shop in Darwin. Early last year McCorkell took delivery of a stand of 15 flags for his Darwin office, to give it that multinational feel. Payment was due in seven days. When McCorkell left town last year, Strachan found his flags for sale in a second-hand shop.

As of Friday last week, Strachan still hadn't seen the money. "Well, yes, that probably still is outstanding," said McCorkell. "I can make that payment. There's a few people who never got paid when we left."

McCorkell agreed that when he used the word "we" he actually meant "I".

In late 2005, after leaving Yarralin, McCorkell began promoting a service for Aboriginal councils offering recovery management for organisations in financial distress, governance training and the temporary placement of CEOs in communities. McCorkell took \$10,000 upfront from the Nganmariyanga community near Port Keats to place an executive. The executive never arrived.

"We were given payment in advance for an essential services officer, and that officer didn't come because they were held up in the desert," McCorkell said. "I hadn't given [Nganmariyanga] a thought. But now you raise it, I'll look into it. That money is still outstanding. We accept we owe that money. There's no issue with that."

Darwin businessman George Kapetas rented out business premises in Cavanagh Street, Darwin, to McCorkell Grosvenor Pty Ltd. Kapetas rues the gentleman's agreement and says he is owed at least \$23,000.

"George has an email from me which indicates very clearly we are in a position to pay the money back and I haven't heard back," said McCorkell. Kapetas said that was incorrect. McCorkell had verbally offered to pay, but after numerous emails and faxes, nothing had been done.

"If anyone's got a valid claim against my company or me personally, my hand is up," said McCorkell. "There's no running away, no shyster activity. I mean that in all honesty. I'm the sort of bloke who would much prefer to pay something off slowly than wind everything up and pay no one."

On the question of Brethren politics, McCorkell said the sect run private schools and were worried during the lead-up to the 2004 election that then Labor leader Mark Latham planned to cut government funding to private schools.

McCorkell said some senior Brethren lived in Bennelong. "As to the anti-Labor sentiment, Labor were bringing out questions on funding private schools. They were nervous about that. That's where it comes from."

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