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# Howard attacked for links to secret Christian sect the Brethren

By Kathy Marks in Sydney

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They describe themselves as "a Christian fellowship based on the Holy Scriptures", but others call them a sect, and they have meddled in elections in New Zealand and Australia.

So when the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, admitted that he had recently met leaders of the ultra-conservative Exclusive Brethren, his critics smelt something unsavoury. The group, an offshoot of the Plymouth Brethren, with followers in Australia, New Zealand, Britain and the US, enforces a policy of separation, including from other Christians. Children are educated in Brethren-run schools; adults work in Brethren-owned companies. Brethren eat, drink and socialise only with other Brethren. Television, mobile phones and computers are banned.

But although members are also forbidden to vote, the group tries to mould the political landscape. Australian Federal Police are investigating expenditure of A\$370,000 (£150,000) on advertisements supporting the Howard government by a company owned by Mark Mackenzie, a senior Brethren member, before the last election in 2004.

During the last election in New Zealand, in 2005, the Brethren spent an estimated A\$100,000 on pamphlets attacking the social policies of the governing Labour Party and the Greens. The former leader of the conservative National Party, Don Brash, later admitted meeting Brethren leaders during the campaign, and said he knew about the pamphlets.

Last year, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, accused the group of spreading rumours that her husband, Peter Davis, was homosexual. She said they had hired a private investigator to follow Mr Davis. It was later confirmed that the Brethren did recruit a private detective to investigate Labour politicians. Now an election is due in Australia before the end of the year, and polls suggest that Mr Howard's chances of winning a fifth term for his right-wing Liberal-National Party coalition are slim.

But yesterday he defended his meeting two weeks ago with Brethren elders, including Mr Mackenzie, and the group's world leader, or "Elect Vessel", Bruce Hales, in his Sydney electoral office.

"I do not deny for a moment that I have met with members of the Exclusive Brethren, and why not?" Mr Howard said. "They're Australian citizens. It's a lawful organisation." Asked about political funding, he told ABC radio: "As to matters relating to financial support, they're things that you should talk to the Liberal Party organisation about."

A Brethren spokesman told local media that the elders had merely assured the Prime Minister that they were praying for him.

Two other members of the Government, the Treasurer, Peter Costello, and the Health minister, Tony Abbott, said they had also met Brethren members. "I have no reason to think they are not people of decency and goodwill," said Mr Abbott, who is a conservative Roman Catholic.

But the opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, described the Brethren as "an extremist cult and sect... [that] breaks up families". The group has also been accused of trying to cover up sexual abuse by a Brethren elder.