

NEWS &gt; General

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### Rudd attacks PM's links to 'cult'

Andrew Fraser

Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd has called on Prime Minister John Howard to come clean on his links to the "extremist cult", the Exclusive Brethren, amid claims he is cosyng up to the group to help win his seat of Bennelong.

Both Mr Rudd and Greens leader Bob Brown pointed yesterday to the continuing Australian Federal Police investigation into the group after a \$370,000 donation to the Coalition at the 2004 election.

Senator Brown called for the probe to be finalised before this year's election, at which he felt certain the "very kooky and socially harmful" Brethren would back Mr Howard again.

He believed the group's support could make the difference in Bennelong, where Labor candidate Maxine McKew leads Mr Howard in the polls.

The group allegedly has 40,000 followers in Australia.

Mr Rudd called on Mr Howard "to level with the Australian public" about his links with the group, led by Bruce Hales, described by Senator Brown as a multimillionaire who lives in Bennelong.

It was revealed yesterday that Mr Howard had met senior leaders of the sect, including "Elect Vessel" Mr Hales, in his office at Parliament House on August 8.

Sydney pump salesman Mark Mackenzie, whose former company Willmac spent \$370,000 on pro-Howard advertising at the last election, also reportedly attended the meeting.

Mr Rudd asked yesterday, "How much money has the Exclusive Brethren given the Liberal Party.

"What was the content of his most recent meeting? What undertakings have been given."

Mr Howard has denied he discussed the coming election campaign with Mr Hales at their meeting.

However, Senator Brown said that would be done by other people in the background.

"The Prime Minister's far too clever to be involved in directly talking about money, but he knows the influence that this sect wields," Senator Brown said.

"It converts from the prayers offered in the Prime Minister's office into the advertisements in the newspapers in Bennelong."

Mr Rudd's call came despite Labor not supporting a motion last week from Senator Brown for a Senate committee inquiry into the Exclusive Brethren, which Labor Senate leader Chris Evans said "looks a bit like a witch-hunt".

"We [the Senate] are not responsible for investigating allegations into the activities of a particular body," he told Parliament on August 15, urging individuals with allegations of illegality or mistreatment to take them to the police.

Senator Brown said that Mr Hales had never allowed himself to be interviewed by the media and there was "no logic" in the Brethren's aims of exerting political influence while formally encouraging adherents not to vote.

The group is also against mobile phones, TV, radio and non-business internet use.

"This is a sect which forbids its kids from eating or drinking with other kids," he said.

It was also against university study and military service, did not allow members' wives to work and "maintains that there shall be no connection with any family member who leaves", cutting off many children from their grandparents.

Mr Howard said it was his job to meet "an enormous number of organisations" and that he met with the Brethren "from time to time".

"I find it quite astonishing that people think it odd that I have met with a lawful organisation," he said. "I do not deny for a moment I have met with members of the Exclusive Brethren, and why not? They're Australian citizens."

He was unaware of any donation to the Liberal Party.

"I don't handle, in a direct sense, any fund-raising matters," he said.

Treasurer Peter Costello said there was nothing wrong with meeting the Exclusive Brethren.

"Over the years I have had many meetings with the Exclusive Brethren just as I have with people from other churches. This is no crime."


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