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Sect's attack ads billed to Libs

- *Matthew Denholm*
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ANTI-GREENS election advertisements authorised by members of the secretive Exclusive Brethren religious sect have been billed to Liberal Party accounts.

Detailed invoices from three newspapers that published ads authorised by Brethren member Roger Unwin during last year's Tasmanian election, list the Liberal Party as the client.

It also appears that anti-Greens ads authorised by at least two other Brethren members were billed to the same accounts held on behalf of the Liberal Party by Hobart advertising agency Master Advertising.

However, both the company, run by former Liberal candidate Chris Guesdon, and Liberal state director Damien Mantach said yesterday that invoicing the advertisements to Liberal accounts was due to an administrative bungle.

Mr Mantach, a former staffer to former industrial relations minister Peter Reith, stood by previous assurances that the party had not drafted or funded advertisements authorised by members of the Christian sect.

"I know it doesn't look fantastic, but the reality is that, as I've always said, we have not paid or placed any advertising for the Brethren," Mr Mantach said. He did, however, confirm discussing "tactics, themes and messages" with Exclusive Brethren members in the lead-up to last year's election campaign.

"They wanted to sound me out on what type of political tactics and so forth we might be employing during the campaign," he said.

He said there were very general discussions about some of the party's themes and messages. These included the Liberals' desire to negate the Green vote, which was running as high as 22 per cent ahead of the campaign. "I don't believe I went into details other than to highlight that we would be running a tactic where our main opposition is that of the Labor Party and we have an interest in

keeping the Greens vote down," he said.

Mr Mantach said it was "quite possible" a Liberal Party member had recommended Mr Guesdon's agency to sect members.

The ads, which attacked Greens policies in terms Mr Mantach said he was not entirely comfortable with, were part of an anti-Green ad blitz blamed by the Greens for its poorer than expected showing on March 18.

The ad authorised by Mr Unwin claimed Greens policies on transgender and intersex issues and drugs would "ruin our families and society".

The half-page ads claimed to represent Mr Unwin's views "as a farmer" and "family man". Mr Unwin did not return calls.

Mr Guesdon said The Mercury, The Advocate and The Examiner had made the same mistake in billing accounts they described as his agency's "Liberal Party account" for all election ads placed by him.

This included anti-Greens ads authorised by Mr Unwin and two other Brethren members, Trevor Christian and David Urquhart, that should not have been listed on the Liberal Party accounts.

When he received the accounts, he broke them into amounts owed by each organisation and billed them separately.

He said the Liberal Party did not pay for Brethren ads.

Mr Guesdon said the Brethren ads were billed to "another organisation", the identity of which he would not reveal.

He confirmed someone, whose identity he could not recall, had recommended he offer to handle the sect's election ads.

Similar controversy dogged New Zealand's National Party during that country's last national election and Party officials initially denied working with the Brethren on election ads.

But Party leader Don Brash admitted later that he had been aware of \$110,000 in election material being prepared by Brethren members.

Dr Brash resigned in November, but denied his resignation was linked to the publication of a book alleging he misled the public about links between his party and the Brethren.

The invoices for Mr Unwin's ads were sought by Tasmania's Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Sarah Bolt, who is investigating allegations by Hobart transsexual Martine Delaney that the Liberal Party was involved in funding or formulating Mr Unwin's advertisements.

"It defies belief that three newspapers would all make the same administrative error," Ms Delaney said yesterday.

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