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Brethren's attack ads bite back at Libs

- *Matthew Denholm*
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LIBERAL Party director Damien Mantach is an early frontrunner for the understatement of 2007. Faced with a wad of invoices showing election ads authorised by Exclusive Brethren members were billed to Liberal accounts, Mantach conceded: "I know it doesn't look fantastic." It looked dodgy.

The Brethren are not like other Christian churches. One can sympathise with the sect's ban on some modern technology. Even its ban on members voting would attract support from some jaded people in the electorate (hypocritical though it is, given the group's efforts to influence elections by other means). But shunning higher education, forbidding women to work in positions of authority over men and seeking to prevent former members seeing their families is something else.

Mantach, a former spin doctor for the federal Coalition, is either the victim of a spectacular cock-up or part of a nasty conspiracy. Even if we give him the benefit of the doubt, this week's revelations in The Australian point to collusion between Liberals and Brethren. Mantach concedes discussing "tactics, themes and messages" with Brethren businessmen in the lead-up to last year's state election campaign. Conversation turned to the need to suppress the vote of their shared enemy, the Greens. It is hard to believe this meeting had no impact on the later decision of Brethren members to publish ads attacking the Greens (albeit in terms Mantach says he would not use).

The Liberals' ad man is Chris Guesdon, a former Liberal candidate. Guesdon conceded someone - who "may have" been a party member, but whose identity he has forgotten - suggested he contact the Brethren and offer to place their ads. It is unclear whether Libs played a role in designing Brethren ads and pamphlets. Mantach says not to his knowledge.

Brethren pig farmer Roger Unwin, whose ads are alleged to have vilified sexual minorities, says he and other Brethren who published anti-Green ads designed the material themselves. However, he was evasive when asked to rule out any input from Liberal material or ideas. The real issue is whether or not members of a mainstream political party have cynically used a religious sect to publish attacks on their opponents and on minority groups - attacks to which they would not put their names.

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