

Secretive religious sect behind anti-gay ads

MPs targeted by mail and ads funded by Exclusive Brethren

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OTTAWA -- A secretive religious sect is behind an aggressive but anonymous direct-mail and advertising campaign against gay marriage that has triggered complaints in Parliament and in the media from MPs and ordinary Canadians from B.C. to Atlantic Canada, The Vancouver Sun has learned.

Some members of the ultra-conservative Exclusive Brethren, who shun relationships with non-members and require their women to wear head scarves in public, organized and funded the campaign, a sect member confirmed Thursday.

The campaign's sponsors identify themselves in the provocative ads and mail-outs only as "concerned Canadian parents," or CCP, with a post office box address located in a Toronto convenience store.

But an employee at the 7-Eleven store said Thursday CCP stopped paying for the box at least three months ago, so all incoming mail is being returned.

The latest CCP initiative was a full-page ad this week in The Hill Times newspaper, a Parliament Hill weekly, telling senators studying Bill C-38 that gay marriage will never "rise to this standard [of being an] honourable relationship."

Members of the Brethren in the U.S. also broke the sect's tradition of non-involvement in politics by spending more than \$500,000 US last year to promote President George W. Bush, though the White House later condemned the group's "shadowy" nature.

Canadian MPs, pro-gay marriage advocacy groups, and citizens writing to local newspapers have been complaining for months about

the campaign's provocative tactics, its likely high cost, and its anonymity.

"To have anonymous money being spent in this way from a post office box in a 7-11 in Toronto is absolutely unacceptable," Ontario Liberal MP Mark Holland complained in the House of Commons in March.

"We do not know who is behind it. Is there foreign money?"

B.C. Conservative MP James Moore, who is pro gay marriage said this week that CCP was responsible for roughly one-third of the 10,000 e-mails, faxes, and letters that streamed into his constituency office on Bill C-38, which was passed in the House of Commons last month.

Exclusive Brethren members have been on Parliament Hill for months, talking to MPs and attending committee meetings. About 30 members -- including 10 women wearing head scarves -- were in the public gallery during the vote on the bill.

Despite the complaints and demands that the group come forward to identify itself, the sponsors of the direct mail campaign remained secret until Thursday.

Ron Heggie, a Toronto advertising agent who placed the Hill Times ad, acknowledged part-way through an interview that he is a member of the Exclusive Brethren and knows some of the other sect members organizing the campaign.

He said those who think the Brethren are being unethical and deceptive don't understand their approach to the outside world.

"It's not that we're hiding anything. It's just that we're not interested in grandstanding," Heggie told the Sun.

The Exclusive Brethren, who are estimated to number between 50,000 and 200,000 and live primarily in North America, England, Australia, and Argentina, are evangelical Christians but not members of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

EFC president Bruce Clemenger, while urging respect for the sect's faith-driven secretive nature, carefully noted the potential negative ramifications of operating anonymously.

"In a plural society we need to make sure there is public space for groups to participate in the public debate in ways that are . . .

consistent with their beliefs and practices, realizing also that the way we engage in the debate will also effect our ability to influence," Clemenger told the Sun.

The CCP name, based on legal advice, has been deliberately written in lower case because it has no official status and isn't registered anywhere, Heggie said.

CCP sent tens of thousands of flyers to Canadian households this spring declaring: "URGENT! A MESSAGE TO ALL (name of riding) FAMILIES," and urging constituents to contact their local MP, who was identified along with the MP's addresses and phone numbers.

Marriage, the pamphlet warns, is "about to be dumped into the garbage can of history."

Numerous MPs across Canada went to the media to stress that they did not send out the pamphlets, as some offended constituents believed, and suggested that CCP deliberately tried to leave that impression.

Heggie said was aware of Holland's complaints to the media and public demand that CCP identify itself, but said he didn't feel obliged to contact him.

"We gave him a method of contacting us and he didn't do it," said Heggie, who added that he believed the 7-11 box was still operational.

"If he's going to stand there and beak off about the fact that we've provided no method of contacting the client, and he has not even used the method we've given him, then I don't feel obliged to talk to them."

Heggie stressed that the Exclusive Brethren, as an organization, wasn't sponsoring the campaign. Instead, it was like-minded members across Canada who got together to organize and pay for the campaign. he said.

He said he isn't aware if Exclusive Brethren from outside Canada, such as the Britain-based businessman who contributed \$377,262 US for the ads in support of President George W. Bush last year, were funding the Canadian campaign.

But he didn't rule out the possibility that non-Canadian Exclusive Brethren were helping to fund the CCP initiative.

The Exclusive Brethren was formed in 1825 in Ireland, when a group left the Church of Ireland because they felt it mingled too much with the secular world.

"They've always had a strong sense of separation from the world, which [they think] God has likely handed over to Satan," Ian Markham, dean of the Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, told the St. Petersburg Times in January.

Markham, whose family left the Exclusive Brethren 30 years ago, said he was surprised by the sect's decision to place pro-Bush ads during the U.S. elections through an organization called the Thanksgiving 2004 Committee.

It's "the first time I've known this to happen in the history of the movement," he said after the Times uncovered the campaign through filings with the U.S. Federal Elections Commission.

The White House and a Florida politician whose campaign for the Senate was endorsed in those ads said they knew nothing about the Exclusive Brethren.

"The president thought we had gotten rid of this kind of shadowy activity," White House spokesman Taylor Gross told the Florida newspaper.

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