

Fanatics get public funds

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A WEALTHY and exclusive religious cult which has been blamed for destroying families is operating in at least six private schools in Queensland with the help of government funding.

The Exclusive Brethren, which has been exposed in recent months for its controversial forays into politics in both New Zealand and Australia, is also actively scheming to ensure John Howard is re-elected as Prime Minister in next year's federal poll.

A former lifelong Brethren member from Bundaberg who managed to escape the group with his family eight years ago said yesterday that the cult's hypocrisy and "brazen" push into politics could end up compromising the Government.

Mr Howard revealed last week that he had met with members of the Exclusive Brethren, saying "it's a free country . . . and like any other group they are entitled to put their views to the Government".

"I've met a lot more fanatical people in my life than the Exclusive Brethren," Mr Howard was reported as saying.

However, members of the Greens, which the Brethren have targeted with hugely negative advertising campaigns in recent state elections, have questioned how such a politically motivated group which bans tertiary education can benefit from both state and federal funding for its schools around Australia.

With one Queensland government source privately describing the school grants as "a gravy train", Queensland Greens election spokeswoman Juanita Wheeler has called for a rethink of guidelines which allow Exclusive Brethren schools to gain non-state school accreditation.

The Exclusive Brethren currently operates schools at Norman Park, and in Bundaberg, Nambour, Toowoomba, Warwick and near Maryborough. The group is also understood to be well advanced with plans for a major new school at Tingalpa in Brisbane.

A media release signed by three leading Brethren men said that the group's position was "not to participate in the political process by voting, but to testify to the truth according to our consciences and pray for and support good government".

Businessman Trevor Hill, who rose to become one of the Exclusive Brethren's "trustees" before leaving at the age of 44,

said the real problem with governments or potential governments receiving money from the Brethren was

that it gave the group power – boosting its ability to lobby governments and, where political donations had been substantial, the obligations were correspondingly substantial.

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