

## Government Story

# Brethren paid for Australian campaign

Tuesday January 23, 2007

CANBERRA – Political donations need to be more transparent following revelations a member of the Exclusive Brethren sect solely funded a \$A370,000 (\$420,000) anti-Greens election campaign, the Australian Greens say.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) found a Sydney company, wholly owned by businessman Mark William Mackenzie, funded advertisements and pamphlets attacking the Greens and calling for the re-election of the Howard Government during the 2004 federal election campaign.

Both Mr Mackenzie, a member of the Exclusive Brethren, and sect leaders declined to comment.

The sect's elders have always denied their church played any part in the campaign, claiming the cost was met by several individual members of the sect all acting alone, it said.

The AEC finding was the result of a year-long investigation sparked by Greens leader Senator Bob Brown.

Green Party Senator Christine Milne yesterday called for an investigation into the ability of third parties to funnel money into election campaigns that ultimately support the causes of major political parties.

"The Exclusive Brethren claim that their election donations are small donations made spontaneously by individuals and that there is no coordination by the church of their political involvement in election campaigns," Senator Milne said.

"Yet here we have a company registered for the period of the 2004 federal election campaign for the purpose of election donations and there is no way the community can know who contributed money to the company for the purpose."

Senator Milne said the party had tried to raise a debate aimed at changing electoral laws relating to political donations late last year in Parliament, but was voted down by the Government.

"At the time, I argued very strongly that there should be an investigation into third parties contributing to election campaigns because the Exclusive Brethren had run this major campaign and nobody knew about it," she said.

Senator Milne said the coalition Government had benefited electorally from the campaign against the Greens and efforts to obtain answers on what meetings had taken place between the Government and the Exclusive Brethren had been stonewalled.

"We've got a situation where, unless somebody knows of a third party donation and makes a complaint, then there is no way the community is going to know how involved third parties have been in election campaigns," Senator Milne said.

"The AEC has absolutely no teeth in these third party arrangements and so the major parties can benefit from huge support from third parties and the rest of the community would have absolutely no idea about it and it will not be disclosed unless someone in the community makes a complaint and it's then investigated.

"When it is investigated, what teeth does the AEC have to look behind the company and see who's made donations or put money into that?"

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