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Exclusive brethren - sects, secrets and lies

Sunday October 1, 2006

By Nicola Shephard

Dargaville couldn't be further from the Beehive, where revelations of Exclusive Brethren political lobbying and espionage are fuelling Parliament's running dog-fight. A rural service town of 4500, the country's kumara capital has a Four Square, RSA, stores with names like Molly's Fashions and Lynley's Lingerie & Linen, a surf shop and one panini-serving cafe for the cool crowd.

Dargaville also has a well-established Brethren community with a big business presence. Long before Exclusive Brethren men hired a private investigator to dig dirt on the Prime Minister and other Labour politicians, before Brethren tried to pressure several political parties into a National-led coalition, before the so-called "Secret Seven" Brethren businessmen put almost \$1 million into anti-Labour and anti-Green pamphlet campaigns at last year's election, members of this fundamental Christian fellowship have been part of the commercial fabric of this town, and the wider Kaipara district. It's the same in 40 towns around the country, from Gisborne to Cust. New Zealand's Exclusive Brethren, who number fewer than 2000, operate about 800 small businesses, according to a political pamphlet they released in 2002.

Brethren run at least 12 firms in Dargaville - mostly in trade and farm supplies - many clustered in an industrial complex on the town's southern edge. Together they employ at least 60 people, either Brethren or Christian. They're highly regarded in business circles. Known as fair, honest employers and reliable, skilful tradesmen. A measure of their influence - and the working tolerance they've won - is the wariness locals show about saying anything bad of them. Says one happy Anglican employee of a Brethren business: "They've got their beliefs, that's fine. I think there's a little bit of scaremongering going on. You can only take people as they treat you."

So at first pass, hardly the Machiavellian, freakish, hostile weirdos you might expect from all the reports. Across the Tasman, we've seen exposes of strong Exclusive Brethren financial backing in

John Howard's re-election and allegations of past money-smuggling and child sexual abuse cover-ups. This week, former teachers at Brethren-run schools claimed the schools heavily censored reading material, ripping out chapters on reproduction from science texts, and dictated every aspect of the children's lives. Since 2003 an Exclusive Brethren trust has set up 15 year 7-12 schools here, teaching about 1000 children. They ban technology.

In the United States and Sweden, Brethren political activism has come to light.

Meanwhile, ex-Brethrens here and overseas are telling of the pain of being shunned by family still in the church.

Though their businesses bring them into daily contact with non-Brethrens, Brethren rules forbid socialising with "worldly" outsiders. Even their churches are typically windowless. The main gospel hall in Dargaville resembles a converted factory, with narrow frosted windows on one side only. They observe "separation from evil", which according to the official Exclusive Brethren website also compels them to "shun the conduits of evil communications: television, the radio and the internet" (newspapers are OK). Other rules ban public entertainment, novels, eating with outsiders, university, membership of other organisations, shorts or ties for men, mobile phones and PCs (allowed to use them for business but not own them). Women must wear their hair long and down, and headscarves in public. Brethren can't vote but are encouraged "to express a moral viewpoint of legislation" to politicians, and to pray for the guidance of "right Government which is clearly of God".

When the *Herald on Sunday* approached Dargaville Brethren businessmen to set the record straight about their way of life, most politely dismissed us. They only say, cryptically: "We've nothing to hide and nothing to parade."

One, for 25 years a manager of an engineering firm, who speaks only on the condition of anonymity, openly expresses a sense of persecution.

"You don't get someone blaming Presbyterians when someone who has a Presbyterian association does something. We're an easy target.

"We are accused of being secretive; it's more that we want to keep our heads down and live according to our convictions. We don't look down on other Christians because they don't live like us. While we don't have fellowship and eat with them, we still appreciate they're genuine people."

He says, "We think women have a major role: to be a Godly influence on their husbands and families. The marriage relationship is very much a partnership. You'll find most of them are really happy in their role."

Exclusive Brethren Vernon Suckling, manager of Trax Equipment, says: "The way we're promoted is certainly not the way we feel we are. We're just simple Christians, normal people, we look after our own and go about our business, don't hurt anyone."

On their rules against mixing socially with outsiders, he says: "We are believers and don't need to go out with people who might not even be Christians. I don't know, we have enough friends of our own."

And representations of Brethren women as oppressed are "rubbish. They're all free, just like you".

What about university or professional careers? "If you understood the way they were brought up, we've got everything that we need in the fellowship, and they don't need to do that so it doesn't really

come up, because they don't want to, really."

The ones that do, or buck against too many of the fellowship's numerous proscriptions, leave. Like Cambridge couple Diana and Adrian* who left the Exclusive Brethren 16 years ago after realising they couldn't live a lie.

Now in their early 40s with four children and a playground business, the couple had been married four years and already had two children when they left. Like most ex-Brethren - they call themselves ex-peebs (short for people of the Exclusive Brethren) - the hardest thing has been losing family from their lives. Says Diana: "To this day my parents are heartbroken, because they can't have anything to do with us. My kids don't know their grandparents as grandparents. I feel sorry for my kids and my parents. I've kept in touch so the kids know them. If our kids were to see my husband's parents in the street, they'd say 'Hello', and 30 seconds later it would be 'I best be on my way'."

Life as an Exclusive Brethren had its good sides. Diana: "I had a great family life, I loved Mum and Dad and my brothers."

With no TV or stereo, most kids learnt to play instruments and played together. "We made it our own fun."

The girls were fiercely competitive about their scarves. "You'd get a new dress and you'd have to get the perfect scarf to match it, and the right shape. I had a whole drawer of Richard Allan and Liberty Silk scarves."

Diana was drinking whisky with her family from age 13. "There were real pissheads in there: they drink heaps, it's the only thing you're allowed to do."

But there were no "worldly" friends over to play, no going to the worldly kids' parties, no overnight school camps, no inter-school sports.

Some broke the rules, sneaking to the neighbours to watch TV, stayed up drinking Saturday nights and showed up at Sunday's 6am prayer meeting with a thick tongue and splitting headache. Three-day religious conventions were a teen dating ground (that's where Diana, who grew up in Palmerston North, met Cambridge local Adrian). "Most girls were there to check out the guys rather than listen to the word of God. Obviously I wasn't a good Brethren girl, but back then I'd never have dreamt of leaving."

But eventually the constant monitoring by other Brethren and having to account for their actions got too much. "We had to cover up things that weren't bad."

Adrian is cynical about the Brethren culture. "They tend to spend their lives trying to get around rules while trying to keep their noses clean."

Once the couple went to the beach with some other young families and took a portable stereo, which got them temporarily banned from church. Remembers Adrian: "Once you were out, you started to question it."

What clinched it for them was realising they "could never say to our children 'we can't have you in the house', like our parents said to us".

"It was very strange coming out," says Diana. "Going out with people you've never met before - a

whole different culture."

They see young single people often "going off the rails" after leaving the church. "A lot of guys, they've got a perception out here it's just one big orgy. Two young girls who left recently are pregnant already," says Adrian.

They believe the rules have been relaxed since their time in the fold. A few years ago a review prompted a round of visits to ex-members. "They apologised for the way they'd been treating us. I think they expected we'd go back and were surprised when we didn't. They're allowed to talk to us now," says Adrian.

The couple maintain a faith in God but don't go to any church. They say people stay in fellowship because of ignorance, fear, family and finances. Most work in Exclusive Brethren businesses, so leaving means losing their job. Denied tertiary education and IT-illiterate, they're ill-equipped for many jobs in the outside world.

Graeme Hubbard left the Exclusive Brethren at 21. Now 53, he's in his second marriage and runs a cartage business in his hometown, Christchurch. He's organising a reunion for "ex-peebs" next Easter, and is expecting 150. There'll be a dinner and dance, a "mystery day" and lots of socialising - "certainly not religious, just a fun weekend".

For him, too, the forced distancing from his parents hurt the most. "I got on very well with my father, and I was never there in the years you want to be there, when they get old and you want to do their lawns."

Meanwhile, the political storm around the Exclusive Brethren intensifies. The Green Party's demanding the group loses its exemption from labour laws requiring union access to work sites, since the cosyng up to political parties makes a mockery of the basis for that exemption - finding association with any outside organisation unconscionable. Helen Clark's calling for Don Brash to step down as National Party leader because of his now-renounced relations with Exclusive Brethren lobbyists. Liberal, Green and gay communities worry about yet another attack on gains in social policy over recent years, while mainstream Christian churches swing towards moral conservatism. This week the New Zealand Presbyterian Church voted to ban anyone in a sexual relationship outside marriage from its leadership roles (though 35 per cent voted against the ban).

There are two main motivations thought to be behind Brethren-backed political campaigns: promoting parties whose policies are closest to Brethren values (anti-gay rights, pro-traditional family, privatisation and decentralisation), thus delaying the "Rapture", when Jesus Christ is expected to descend and take away true believers; and, the more worldly theory of promoting parties with business-friendly policies to further Brethren's own business interests.

Massey religious history expert Peter Lineham believes the political campaigns are part of a masterplan orchestrated by the powerful, rich Sydney-based world leader Bruce Hales, implemented here by a select group of Brethren businessmen. "Ordinary Exclusive Brethren would still retain a view held deeply for many generations that they have nothing to do with the world, regard it as defiled, so would be disgusted with (the political activism)."

In Dargaville, the businessmen give the impression they're in the dark about the masterplan.

Says one, his smile like a plea: "We don't want to get into a media conflict. We urge you to wait.

What's behind it all will come out in time. The truth always does."

*Their names have been changed to protect their identities.

Minding their business

* Fewer than 2000 Exclusive Brethren New Zealanders

* Around 800 mainly small private businesses

* Firms clustered in around 40 towns and cities, mostly provincial centres

* Business types include farm machinery, agriculture, horticulture, orchards, vineyards, office furniture and trades

* An internal memo sent to Brethren worldwide leaked to One News talks about setting up an umbrella group code-named National Office Assist. A shell company of that name has already been set up here, reportedly to help the church hire its own without relying on "worldly people"

* A national trust, run by three of the Secret Seven who bankrolled the anti-government pamphlets last year, now operates 15 regional campuses under the umbrella of Westmount School. The schools teach around 1000 year 7-12 students, and get glowing ERO reports