

HUNTER BUSINESSMAN TELLS

How I escaped from 'cult'

EXCLUSIVE by Ian Kirkwood



A PROMINENT Hunter businessman has told of "escaping" from the controversial religious group the Exclusive Brethren, which he says is strengthening its activities in the region.

Hilton Grugeon, the wealthy Maitland businessman and friend of Prime Minister John Howard, told *The Herald* he grew up in the Exclusive Brethren, which he said could legitimately be described as "a cult".

"To the outside world, they are the nicest people you could meet, they are the perfect neighbours," Mr Grugeon said.

"But to their members, especially those who disagree with the leadership, they can be extremely harsh."

Mr Grugeon said he was "turned out" by the church in 1990 after a testimony of "lies" by another church member.

"I am lucky my wife knew it was a lie, otherwise she would probably have stayed in the church, and they would have made sure that I never saw my wife and four children again," Mr Grugeon said.

The Brethren has developed a reputation for not talking to the media and a Hunter spokesman contacted yesterday answered some of *The Herald's* questions but said a more detailed response would be provided later.

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Businessman tells of escaping from 'cult'

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Spokesman David Craddock confirmed that Mr Grugeon had left the church but rejected the description of the Brethren as a cult and said the former member's account told only one side of the matter.

The publicity-shy Brethren have hit the headlines this year over its growing involvement in conservative politics in Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada, despite edicts forbidding members to vote.

The Brethren have been linked to "anti-gay" campaigns against the openly gay Greens leader Bob Brown, and were blamed by New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark for a smear campaign against her and her husband Peter Davis.

Mr Grugeon said the Hunter Valley had some "very active" Brethren churches and the group was planning a religious school at Barnsley.

Mr Craddock confirmed the school plan for about 0.8 hectares on two blocks.

Edgeworth real estate agent Bill Shepherd said the sale to School Holdings Pty Ltd was conditional on Lake Macquarie City Council approving a development application for the school.

A council spokeswoman said talks about



GROWING: Hilton Grugeon said that the Brethren were strengthening their activities in the Hunter.

the Barnsley school had begun in late August, but a development application had not been lodged.

Mr Grugeon, a key backer of federal Pateron MP Bob Baldwin, said he often saw Brethren members in Parliament House, where they were presumably on business with government members.

Mr Howard answered recent questions about the group by acknowl-

edging he had met some of its members.

Mr Grugeon said the Brethren was a very rich church because its members were often successful in business and they had little to spend their money on because they spurned the trappings of consumer society.

This meant they had plenty of money to indulge in political campaigns.

A church-endorsed

website, theexclusive-brethren.com, says "the Exclusive Brethren practice separation from evil ... they shun the conduits of evil communications; television the radio and the internet".

Mr Grugeon recounted how one church member had a business in the building trade, a wife and young twin children.

He said the man ran his business for years without a mobile phone, but eventually succumbed and bought one because it was proving all but impossible to organise jobs without one.

"It was just a phone but as far as they were concerned he had broken the rules and he was expelled from the church and was not allowed to see his wife or his children," Mr Grugeon said.

Mr Craddock disagreed with this version of events.

The church website says it began with the teachings of John Nelson Darby, who helped found the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland in 1827.

The website says the church has more than 40,000 members in more than 300 "local assemblies" in 19 countries.

Its international leader is Bruce Hales, from West Ryde in Sydney, who is described as one of an "unbroken line of divinely accredited" leaders.