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Sect asked for power to prevent child visits

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THE Greens senator Bob Brown will move for a Senate inquiry into the activities of the Exclusive Brethren religious sect next year after revelations of its long attempts to influence the Government on family law.

The *Herald* can also reveal that the Brethren met the Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, early last year and asked him to amend the Family Law Act to "ensure that a child is not subject to a radical lifestyle change without compelling reason".

If the request was granted no child brought up in a Brethren family would be able to have access visits with a parent who had left the strictly separatist sect.

Documents obtained by Fairfax also reveal that the Brethren representatives wanted Mr Ruddock, as part of the 2005 Family Law Act amendments, to beef up "parenting plans" to make them legally enforceable. Such plans are designed mainly to help separating parents sort out access arrangements, but the Brethren wanted to use them to prohibit parents who had left the sect from getting access to their children.

In a letter to Mr Ruddock on May 5 last year the sect described the concept of parenting plans as a "crucial issue".

"Why shouldn't the fact that a parenting plan has been adopted by the parties (even before any discord has arisen) be a factor that the court is expressly directed to take into account in determining issues?" sect representatives wrote to Mr Ruddock.

"Or could there be some presumption arising out of the fact that a parenting plan has been entered into?"

Such a provision would mean the Brethren could force newly married adherents to sign statements promising to bring children up within the strict rules of the sect, and then have those statements enforced by the court if the marriage broke down. Family law practitioners Fairfax has spoken to have ridiculed the idea.

Mr Ruddock's response to the Brethren was that the Government's changes would "emphasise the rights of the child and the right of the child to know both their parents".

The *Herald* revealed yesterday that the thrust of all Brethren lobbying in family law is to keep lapsed members away from their children, and keep children within the sect.

The group has been more successful in its lobbying in other areas. In industrial relations law it has been granted "conscience" clauses to prohibit unions from entering its businesses.

Senator Brown moved unsuccessfully earlier this year for a Senate inquiry into the sect, and he said yesterday he would put a similar motion next year.

"I want an inquiry into the impact and effort to undermine Australia's family law, and to override the interests of children for self-interest, which is the exclusion of Australian society from what they do."

He said Mr Ruddock should reveal all details of his and his predecessor Daryl Williams's dealings with the sect because "their success with IR laws shows they're used to getting a result out of the lobbying". Senator Brown has asked questions of 20 federal ministers about details of their meetings with the Brethren, but none has responded.

"This leverage on the Government and the Attorney-General is obviously very strong," Senator Brown said.

The documents obtained by Fairfax showed "a plan by the sect to gain precedence over all other Australian families".

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