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## Doctrine and law collide in a curious test of faith

Richard Ackland  
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The political clout of holy-roller fundamentalist evangelicals has gone off the boil in the US. The mid-term elections put a stake, along with a couple of cloves of garlic, through the heart of that awe-inspiring alliance of capitalism and God-bothering.

Maybe the gifted work of Pastor Ted Haggard from the National Association of Evangelicals, who also liked a bit of rent boy hanky-panky on the side, didn't help the clean lines of the message. Hallelujah to Jimmy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, too. Nor did the text messaging of Republican congressman Mark "Protecting Our Children" Foley do much for the cause.

But down here business is booming - that's the business of cutting-edge fundamentalists bending the ear of politicians and judges to see if they can skew things their screwy way.

Over the past few days the *Herald* has carried reports of the special pleading by the Exclusive Brethren to the federal Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, and to the former chief justice of the Family Court, Alastair Nicholson. The brethren want the law to reflect their customary beliefs. It's a debate we've been having in this country in relation to customary Aboriginal law and the extent, if any, it can be accommodated by whitefella law.

The Federal Government says there is no place for the recognition of minority customary law by the one true law. And it has a point, especially when it comes to special pleading by elderly male Aborigines who claim a "right" to take young girls as their wives and rape them.

The brethren are claiming a right to keep children away from parents who have been excommunicated from the sect. Its members have gone to extraordinary lengths to subvert Family Court orders, moving a sister, brother and mother 700 kilometres from an excommunicated father who had right of access.

A member who falls out with the brethren will have their family broken up and their life turned into a fresh kind of hell. This flows from a motley collection of rules and superstitions leaping straight from the early 1800s. There are bans on members going to universities, the beach, cinemas, watching TV, using the internet, mobile phones or listening to the radio.

Members are not allowed to wear shorts (a sensible prohibition) or marry anyone not approved by the higher authorities. Married women are not allowed to have jobs outside the sect. Members cannot eat with non-members or, mysteriously, share a common wall with someone who isn't of the faith. Members are banned from voting, apparently because God selects governments, not men. This must come close to transgressing the law because it is a requirement in Australia that at elections everyone on an electoral roll should attend a polling booth.

The ban on voting is confusing, especially as the head of the church is called the Elect Vessel. The present Elect Vessel, Bruce Hales, is an office equipment supplier from West Ryde who inherited the leadership from his father, so the electing may not have been all that rigorous in this family enterprise.

Correspondence from supporters of the vessel to Nicholson asked that the Family Court refuse custody or access to a parent who has left the Exclusive Brethren. To do otherwise would only cause "trauma". It asserted that children want to "refrain from contact" with the parent who has been expelled from the sect.

The *Herald* has reported there was abundant evidence the organisation flouted access orders and denied the rights of parents to see their children.

The Family Court has the power to enforce its orders by citing disobedient parties for contempt, or changing custody and access orders. But enforcement can be difficult if it involves confrontation with ferocious zealots.

Ruddock was asked last year by the brethren to amend the Family Law Act to require the court to reflect the sect's special mode of living. They received a lot of polite waffle from the Attorney-General about the family relationship centres to be rolled out across the land.

Nonetheless, there has been a marked contrast in the understanding the Government has afforded the brethren's desire for special recognition of its customary law. The Tasmanian Liberal senator Eric Abetz said Senator Bob Brown's criticisms of the brethren's political interference were "ridiculous assertions about people who are genuinely Christian Australian citizens".

The Exclusive Brethren does not grow by recruitment. It grows by breeding - hence the frantic efforts to keep children of the faith locked away from the outside world, and especially from parents who have seen the light.

Brown is having another crack at getting the Senate to investigate the subterranean political meddling of the brethren. He's got a fat chance of getting this evangelical-friendly Government to support a clean-out of the stables.

[justinian@lawpress.com.au](mailto:justinian@lawpress.com.au)

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