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Sect covered up sex assaults on two children

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THE Exclusive Brethren sect has tried for almost four years to cover up the sexual assaults of two girls, protecting the abuser, ostracising the victims and blaming their mother.

The perpetrator, a senior, respected and rich Brethren elder in a country town, was found guilty two weeks ago of eight charges in a Sydney court, including the digital rape of one girl of eight, and the repeated indecent assault of her older sister, who was 12 and 13 when the offences occurred.

The Age has obtained a document showing the Brethren leadership ignored written warnings as early as 1991 that the perpetrator, a serial molester, had "sexually assaulted many young women within the sect".

The abuser has been ejected from the secretive group, and is in custody awaiting sentencing.

The Christian sect has become notorious in recent years for running expensive advertising campaigns for conservative parties. It successfully lobbied the Liberal Government, and the Prime Minister, John Howard, has admitted meeting representatives. In New Zealand, the sect hired private detectives to tail the Prime Minister, Helen Clark, and contributed to the downfall of the National Party leader, Don Brash, when he denied accepting their funds.

Revelations in *The Age* about the sect's lobbying efforts and Government funding of its schools has prompted the Greens leader, Bob Brown, to move for an inquiry into the sect. Labor sources say the party's leader, Kevin Rudd, is taking the allegations seriously and is following events "very closely".

None of the parties in the recent sexual assault case can be identified for legal reasons, but the distraught father of the two victims has come forward and told *The Age* that in 2003, before the case was reported to police, the girls' mother came under intense pressure by the sect not to report the assaults to police.

"A local Brethren woman quoted the scripture to my ex-wife. She said, 'It would be better for a millstone to be hung around your neck and for you to be cast into the depths of the sea, rather than go to the police.' "

According to the father, one of the Brethren's Australian leaders also told the victims' mother that she should take the blame for the sexual assaults.

During this time, the wife of the sexual predator was allowed to interview the older sister for several hours. Towards the end of that session, the abuser himself also joined the interview. Under the pressure, the girl retracted her complaints and issued a written apology to her abuser and his wife.

"It was a coerced admission that it was because of my own daughter's naughtiness and sinfulness that she had said such a thing," the father told *The Age*.

The retraction and apology was presented as evidence for the defence during the man's trial, but rejected by the jury.

Later that year, two senior Brethren women grilled the girls for several hours. The results of this interview were reported to the church's leadership.

These interviews later led police and the director of public prosecutions to fear that the girls' evidence might have become too contaminated to secure a conviction, the father said.

Seeing the psychological effect the assaults and manipulation were having on her children, the mother wanted professional counselling for them.

However, she was warned that a counsellor would be compelled to report the assaults to police. This warning, and the hold the Brethren had over her, caused her to delay seeking professional help for her traumatised daughters for a further three months, the father says.

It was not until November 2003 that she reported the assaults. Police arrested the perpetrator in February 2004.

In Brethren theology, the "worldly" courts are inferior to their own "assembly". In words from April 2003 that were recorded and published to be taken as gospel by the sect's 40,000 adherents, the world leader of the sect, Sydney office supply salesman Bruce Hales, said it was "a very great matter, I think, to know that this place, the assembly, is the highest court".

It was only after the charges were laid that the Brethren imposed any "assembly discipline" on him. "That set the scene for the vilification of my family," the father said. "The kids were excluded at school, jeered at, made fun of. And from that time ensued a period where my ex-wife's house was repeatedly egged - eggs under the doormat, being smashed on the windows, the car being scratched."

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