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Where art thou, Brethren?



Attempts to find out where the cash came from quickly come to the same point.

Photo: Greg Newington

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A small private company claims to be the sole source of a \$370,000 campaign supporting the Howard Government at the last federal election. David Marr reports.

Mark Mackenzie lives in a modest house on the fringes of Sydney and runs a modest business selling and servicing pumps. He is a thoroughly inconspicuous man. Today may well be the first time his name has appeared in a newspaper. But this foot soldier in the secretive Exclusive Brethren is a mover and shaker in Australian politics.

A little company owned entirely by Mackenzie paid \$370,000 to mount its own campaign for the return of the Howard Government during the last election. At least, that's the Australian Electoral Commission's answer to the riddle of whose money lay behind a slew of ads and pamphlets in three states in September and October 2004 attacking the Greens and calling for the re-election of John Howard.

The Exclusive Brethren denies masterminding the campaign despite all the aggressive ads and pamphlets being authorised by members of the sect. After complaints by the Greens leader, Bob Brown, the Electoral Commission began a year-long investigation into the source of the funding. Just before Christmas the commission announced Mackenzie's company, Willmac Enterprises Pty Ltd, was the campaign's sole paymaster.

"The AEC has found that expenditure on all seven advertisements and pamphlets was disclosed in a third party return by Willmac Enterprises following the 2004 federal election," the commission said on its website on December 19. "Further, there is no evidence that Willmac Enterprises received any gifts or donations from other sources that contributed to the costs of the advertisements and pamphlets."

So what was Willmac's line of business? Mackenzie declined to discuss the issue. He told the *Herald* he had many

children, was pressed and "unable to comment at this point".

Now in his early 40s, Mark Mackenzie has been in the pump business for many years. Former members of the sect say he was once employed by a pump company in Parramatta owned and operated by a brother of Bruce Hales, the sect's world leader. Members of this tightly disciplined sect refer to their leader as the Elect Vessel, the Lord's Representative on Earth, the Paul of Our Day and Mr Bruce.

Mackenzie's little company, Willmac Enterprises, was incorporated three weeks before the 2004 election with Mackenzie as the sole shareholder and only director. Despite having capital of only \$10, it almost immediately found a small fortune to pay for pro-Howard ads in the Adelaide *Advertiser*, the Hobart *Mercury*, suburban papers through the Adelaide Hills, and in John Howard's electorate of Bennelong.

Willmac also paid for the printing and distribution of a pamphlet bitterly resented by the Greens in Tasmania. Turning up in most letterboxes in the island state during the final weeks of the 2004 campaign, the Green Delusion leaflet was the only electoral material that actually carried Mackenzie's name. The fine print read: "Authorised by M. William Mackenzie, 11 Baden Powell Place, North Rocks, NSW, 2101."

The cost of all this - \$370,461 - put the newcomer Willmac among the biggest spenders on independent or "third party" campaigns during the election. Mackenzie's company outspent all the usual suspects: Right to Life (\$30,555), the Australian Conservation Foundation (\$127,099), the Australian Health Insurance Association Ltd (\$196,642), the Wilderness Society (\$229,073), the National Union of Students (\$255,307), and others.

The fingerprints of the Exclusive Brethren all over this campaign remained undiscovered for nearly a year. Only when the Green Delusion leaflet turned up in letterboxes all over New Zealand during that country's September 2005 election did Greens officials in Australia go back to ads and pamphlets from 2004 to discover how many were authorised by members of the sect. Senator Christine Milne said: "We found there was a systematic exercise all over Australia."

Under Australian law that would seem to require the Exclusive Brethren to file an electoral return "setting out details of all electoral expenditure incurred by or with the authority of members of the group". The Brethren has never done this.

Instead, a spokesman, Warwick John, claimed in September 2005 that the pro-Howard campaign was financed by "several individual Sydney businessmen" who happened to be believers.

That was the line. Daniel Hales, another of the Elect Vessel's brothers, told the *Herald* last year there was no church involvement in the 2004 campaign: "You've got to allow for spontaneity." And Senator Eric Abetz - a great defender of the sect and at the time the minister responsible for the electoral commission - told Parliament in June last year: "It was not the Exclusive Brethren. It was a number of individuals, as I understand it, that placed advertisements."

Never mentioned by the Exclusive Brethren all this time was Willmac Enterprises Pty Ltd and its claim to be the only source of funds and sole paymaster of a \$370,000 pro-Howard advertising blitz. Athol Greene, one of the most respected leaders of the sect, invited the *Herald* to fax him details of the case. We asked how the revelation of Willmac's role was to be understood "in the light of all that has been said on this subject by Brethren leaders over they years". He did not reply.

For Bob Brown, the late appearance of Mackenzie's little company in this saga is further proof that the campaign

against the Greens and for the Government in 2004 was highly orchestrated. "My bead on the Exclusive Brethren is that they have legal advice and anything inside the law is fine by them and there is no deceit or trickery aimed at putting off the scent that they won't go to if they're safe in doing it," he says.

For more than 150 years, devotees of this prosperous faith have been forbidden from meddling in worldly politics. They are still forbidden to vote - and have exemption in law from doing so - but soon after Mr Bruce took over the church on the death of his father in 2002 members of the Exclusive Brethren began putting their names to political advertisements.

This revolutionary step has caused intense controversy inside the sect, though its followers are, on the whole, too terrified to contest what's happening. Those who question the Elect Vessel court expulsion from both the faith and their families.

The sect's move into politics has also been controversial in the outside world - or has been since its tactics were detected. That was not easy. The core complaint about the sect is not that it's out there campaigning for "family" values, business breaks and tough conservative leadership. It's free to do so. What critics object to are the lengths to which the sect goes to cover its tracks. As a Brethren campaigner said in America in 2004: "We like to fly beneath the radar."

Immediately after Howard's re-election, the Brethren was advertising in the US in support of the re-election of George Bush - "America is in Safe Hands" - and shaving it very fine with the Federal Election Commission. It plunged immediately and anonymously into a campaign against New Zealand's Civil Union Bill. Same-sex marriage is a big issue with the Brethren and after this drive it mounted a big and very secretive campaign to defeat similar legislation in Canada. Both these efforts failed.

By this time, the New Zealand National Party was becoming entangled with Brethren who were planning to invest more than \$NZ1 million in the 2005 election.

The journalist Nicky Hager has revealed in his book *The Hollow Men* that the party's leader, Don Brash, drew steadily closer to the sect that year. Caught at the last minute denying knowledge of Brethren plans, Brash narrowly lost the poll. When Hager's book appeared late last year, Brash resigned his leadership.

Once New Zealand blew the sect's cover, the Australian Greens turned their sights on the Brethren. After attacking the secretive tactics of the sect in the Senate in late 2005, Bob Brown was asked to give whatever help he could to an inquiry by the Australian Electoral Commission. The question was: did the Exclusive Brethren need to file details of campaign expenditure from the 2004 federal election?

Brown gave the commission copies of ads and pamphlets and in a January 2006 letter also pointed out problems with the address Mackenzie had given on the Green Delusion pamphlet. "I am informed," wrote the senator, "that the electoral roll of 2003 does not have a Mackenzie at the address of 11 Baden Powell Road, North Rocks, but that the premises, which appeared deserted when visited last September, may be owned by the Exclusive Brethren."

It would emerge a few months later in a report by ABC radio's *Background Briefing* that several of the addresses given on electoral material by members of the sect in 2004 appeared to be bogus.

This followed a pattern already evident in New Zealand, America and Canada where, at the very least, the contact details provided were hardly candid. "That's just a sensible move to avoid persecution," Stephen Hales, another

brother, told the *Herald*. "It avoids the mad hatter attack, isn't that fair?"

But Australian law requires everyone authorising electoral material to state where they "can usually be contacted during the day". The commission was to acknowledge problems with a number of the addresses given by sect members in the election, but showed no interest in investigating the issue.

Not even Brown's specific complaint about the North Rocks address was pursued. A commission spokesman, Phil Diak, said: "The AEC requires a formal complaint with appropriate evidence." Asked what evidence was required, he replied: "I wouldn't be able to predict that."

The commission tried only to follow the money - and came to accept Willmac's version of events. "The AEC conducted a very thorough investigation over 12 months in which it undertook several lines of inquiry," Diak said. "By following the trail of every advertisement/pamphlet listed back to the source of payment the investigation established they were all made by Willmac Enterprises."

But who was paying Willmac? The commission would not say what steps it took to rule out the perhaps obvious notion that suburban pump merchant Mark Mackenzie's company was a moneybox for the Exclusive Brethren. The commission found "no evidence that Willmac Enterprises received any gifts or donations from other sources that contributed to the costs of the advertisements and pamphlets".

For former Brethren all over the world pursuing evidence of hypocrisy in the sect under the leadership of Bruce Hales, and for Bob Brown defending his party against attack from these rich and shadowy figures on the Christian fringe, the commission's finding is not the end of the matter. "I think it is a highly deceptive and global campaign which is being slowly, slowly brought out into the light of day," says the senator.

He adds, citing the Bible: "As Rebecca at the well says, you are allowed to lie if deceiving is for the good of the Lord."

The Brethren remains resolutely out of sight, refusing to explain itself. Its leaders refuse to be photographed. Elder Athol Greene gave the *Herald* only this gnomic response to its inquiries: "As I understand it, we don't exist in the eyes of the law."

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