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## Brown demands sect inquiry

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GREENS Senator Bob Brown will move for a Senate inquiry into the activities of the Exclusive Brethren religious sect next year, following revelations of their long attempts to influence the Government on family law.

*The Age* is able to reveal that the Brethren met Attorney-General Phillip Ruddock 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".

The request would mean that 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 *The Age* also reveal that the Brethren representatives wanted Mr Ruddock, as part of the Government's 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 describes 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.

The idea was ridiculed by family law practitioners who have spoken to *The Age*.

Mr Ruddock's response to the Brethren's approach gave them little joy. The Government's changes would "emphasise the rights of the child and the right of the child to know both their parents," he wrote.

*The Age* 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. On other occasions, the group has been more successful in its attempts to lobby governments, state and federal. In industrial relations law, they have been granted "conscience" clauses to prohibit unions from entering their businesses.

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

He said Mr Ruddock should reveal all details of his and his predecessor Daryl Williams' 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 have responded.

"This leverage on the Government and the Attorney-General is obviously very strong, and I think it's quite clever, to try to have the family law and Family Court give preference to the sect in its beliefs," Senator Brown told *The Age*.

The documents obtained by *The Age* show "a plan by the sect to gain precedence" over all other Australian families.

"They make the extraordinary claim that the lifestyle of Australians is inappropriate for bringing up children and only they know how to do it, and they say the court should not allow child to see their non-Brethren parent," Senator Brown said.

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