

# **The ‘Brethren Cult Controversy’: Dissecting a Contemporary Australian ‘Social Problem’**

Bernard Doherty

*Macquarie University*

Since September 12 2005 the Christian sect known as the Exclusive Brethren have catapulted from relative obscurity to front-page newspaper reports, prime-time television coverage, and the subject of numerous parliamentary debates in Australia. The reasons for this, however, are far more complex than mainstream media reports suggest. Using insights from contextual constructionist theory this article traces the social construction of what it calls the ‘Brethren Cult Controversy’ from its roots in political controversies over the period between 2004 and 2007 to more recent controversies over Brethren education funding, Brethren development siting, and the charitable status of minority religious groups. I argue that, among other reasons, the Brethren’s rise to prominence is directly related to the socio-political milieu of Howard-era Australia (1996-2007) and the Brethren’s contemporaneous reduction of their ‘sectarian tension’ with mainstream Australian culture. This article also analyses the popular perception of the ‘Brethren threat’ in mainstream Australian public discourse and the ways in which the media have framed the ‘Brethren Cult Controversy’ as a social problem.

**Keywords:** Exclusive Brethren, Media, Controversy, Politics, Church/State Issues, Sects

## **Introduction**

Since the late 1960s social scientists have attempted, through the adoption of a variety of approaches, to understand perceived social problems from a perspective that assesses not only measurable empirical and objective aspects but also the more subjective factors that go into the construction and maintenance of certain issues or events as social problems. Such approaches, known under the broad title of social constructionism, have since been used to analyse a plethora of perceived social problems ranging from

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prohibition to paedophilia, from marijuana use to Satanism.<sup>1</sup> Often in concert with studies in the sociology of ‘deviance’ and of moral hysteria, this form of inquiry has proved a powerful lens through which to view the interaction between the claims of competing interest groups and the hard empirical facts that underlie the articulation of social problems.<sup>2</sup> It has also contributed to what we might call the maintenance of concern; whereby continual claims and advocacy insure that what might have otherwise been a fairly isolated incident or set of events remains an issue of on-going concern or controversy.

This article adopts a moderate social constructionist perspective, often referred to as contextual constructionism,<sup>3</sup> which on the one hand recognizes the objective basis of concerns while on the other hand balancing the subjective constructionist elements which have facilitated the maintenance (and sometimes exaggeration) of concern, to outline and analyse the transformation that the small Christian sect popularly known as the Exclusive Brethren has undergone in Australia over the past decade from being a relatively obscure, if sporadically controversial, religious group to being touted by prime-time television current affairs programmes like Channel Seven’s *Today Tonight* as “Australia’s biggest cult.”<sup>4</sup> This article argues that, far from representing a growing or immediate threat, the level of the Brethren’s “sectarian tension”<sup>5</sup> with the surrounding society has, in some aspects, softened since a change in leadership in 2002, but that this has led to a higher social visibility. This, in turn, has led to a heightened awareness in the surrounding society of the Brethren’s ‘otherness’, which has tested what Gary Bouma has called Australia’s traditional “live-and-let live” tolerance,<sup>6</sup> and resulted in a series of public

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Best, *Threatened Children* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusades: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963); Philip Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Britain* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1992); James T. Richardson *et al.* eds, *The Satanism Scare* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1966); Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers* (London: Routledge, 1972); Keith Thompson, *Moral Panics* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Joel Best, ‘But Seriously Folks: The Limitations of Strict Constructionist Interpretation of Social Problems’, in *Reconsidering Social Constructionism: Debates in Social Problems Theory*, eds James A. Miller *et al.* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993), pp. 129-147; Jenkins, *Intimate Enemies*, pp. 2f.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Australia’s biggest cult busted’, *Today Tonight* (Melbourne: Channel Seven Australia, October 22, 2010). For the sake of clarity it should be noted that the use of ‘cult’ is not intended pejoratively, but rather to demonstrate the popular parlance used in discussions of the Brethren.

<sup>5</sup> William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, ‘Sectarian Tension’, *Review of Religious Research*, vol. 22 no. 2 (1980), pp. 105-124.

<sup>6</sup> Gary D. Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century* (Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 47.

controversies surrounding the group and the construction of the 'Brethren Cult Controversy'. By outlining the social setting in which this transformation has taken place; the attendant ideological and political factors which have helped to highlight the controversy; and the diverse range of interest groups involved in the maintenance of concern, this article provides an "anatomy of a contemporary crisis,"<sup>7</sup> and brings a different perspective to the understanding of the Exclusive Brethren and their place in contemporary Australian society.

In what follows, this article analyses the Brethren Cult Controversy and a number of the more problematic elements of their socially constructed presentation. First is a brief overview of the Exclusive Brethren; their history and their key beliefs. Second, there is a short narrative description of the setting and course of the Brethren Cult Controversy. Third, the social context in which this controversy originally erupted is examined, focusing in particular on the social and political context of John Howard's tenure as Prime Minister of Australia from 1996 to 2007. Fourth, the key claims-makers and interest groups involved in the Brethren Cult Controversy are identified. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the outcomes of the controversy to date. It is intended to contribute to the (currently) small amount of academic literature on the topic,<sup>8</sup> and to locate the Brethren in Australia's mediation of its religious landscape.

### **The Exclusive Brethren**

The Exclusive Brethren, now incorporated as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC), have been referred to by a variety of labels including (among others) Plymouth Brethren IV, the Raven-Taylor-Symington-Hales Brethren, the Taylorites, the Jimmies/Jimites, or the Hanky-Heads.<sup>9</sup> One branch of the larger Brethren movement traces its roots to the 1827-1828 'breaking-of-bread' that took place in Dublin, Ireland by

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<sup>7</sup> To borrow from Jenkins' subtitle *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Bryan Wilson, 'The Exclusive Brethren: A Case Study in the Evolution of Sectarian Ideology', in *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organisation and Ideology in Religious and Social Movements*, ed. Bryan Wilson (London: Heinemann, 1967), pp. 287-342; Massimo Introvigne and Domenico Maselli, *The Brethren: From Plymouth to Present: A Protestant Critique of Modernity* (Turin: CESNUR, 2008); Nigel Scotland, 'Encountering the Exclusive Brethren: A late twentieth century cult', *European Journal of Theology*, vol. 6 no. 2 (1997), pp. 157-167; Roger Shuff, *Searching for the True Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> For a broad survey of Brethren origins see Peter Embley, 'The early development of the Plymouth Brethren', in *Patterns of Sectarianism*, pp. 213-243; Roger Shuff, 'Open to Closed: The Growth in Exclusivism Amongst Brethren in Britain 1848-1953', *Brethren Archivists and Historians Network Review*, vol. 1 (1997-1998), pp. 10-23.

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a group of evangelicals disenchanted by what they perceived as the sectarianism and latitudinarianism amongst contemporary Protestant denominations.<sup>10</sup> This small group, including key Brethren figures Edward Cronin, Anthony Norris Groves, John Nelson Darby, and John Gifford Bellett, went on to form a series of loose-knit assemblies which, in accordance with their interpretation of the New Testament, would meet on Sunday (known simply as Lord's Day among Brethren) to break bread as a visible sign of their communion; spurned a professional clergy; and emphasized the importance of the local assembly rather than any overarching denominational structure or hierarchy. These informal groups eventually spread across the United Kingdom, United States, and Europe forming a series of local and largely autonomous assemblies which became popularly known as 'the brothers from Plymouth' or 'Plymouth Brethren' after two leading-lights among the group, J. N. Darby and Benjamin Wills Newton, briefly settled in Plymouth, England in 1831. Following a series of bitter disputes between Darby and Newton,<sup>11</sup> the movement split into the two broad categories of 'Open Brethren', who (generally) allow the participation of all sincere Christians in their Lord's Supper, a weekly 'breaking of bread' at which members of the Brethren community partake in the 'emblems' (the bread and wine) following the practices outlined in the New Testament texts of 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 20:19; Acts 20:7 and Matthew 26:26-28, and 'Closed Brethren', who only allow committed members of the assembly to partake in the Lord's Supper.

The PBCC are now arguably the largest of a series of so-called Closed Brethren groups who separated from the larger, but also fragmented, Open Brethren over the question of fellowship with members who were perceived to be in doctrinal or moral error (the so-called 'Bethesda Question') in 1848.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the Open Brethren, the Closed Brethren, also sometimes known as Connexional Brethren or Darbyites, emphasize a doctrine known as the 'separation from evil' in which the purity of the Brethren assembly is considered paramount and issues of correct doctrine and personal morality are subject to various forms of penitential discipline within the community. This includes the controversial practices of 'shutting up', a form of temporary exclusion from communal life, and, in extreme cases 'putting out' or 'withdrawal', a form of

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<sup>10</sup> On the events in Dublin see Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992), pp. 59-112. On the general conditions which led to the formation of the Brethren see David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> On the controversial relationship between Darby and Newton see Jonathan D. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict: The Controversial Relationship between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Introigne and Masselli, *The Brethren*, pp. 34-39.

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excommunication and subsequent shunning. A number of different groups have been labelled 'Exclusive Brethren' and as such, amongst Brethren scholars and historians, various groups are distinguished either by a number, for example, Plymouth Brethren IV, or by a combination of the names of their historical leaders, such as the Raven-Taylor-Symington-Hales Brethren.<sup>13</sup> This is an important point to emphasize as relations or agreement between various Exclusive Brethren on matters of doctrine or practice are frosty and fractured at best, and the PBCC in particular are often viewed with a great deal of suspicion by many other Brethren groups both 'Open' and 'Closed'.<sup>14</sup>

The PBCC have become especially known for their strict interpretation and implementation of the doctrine of separation from evil, which has been the subject of a series of negative media reports since the 1960s in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> Among the elements most stressed here have been their refusal to be 'unequally yoked'<sup>16</sup> with 'worldly' organizations such as trade unions or professional associations (but extended to issues such as voting in political elections or serving in combat roles during war); their strictures on the use of various forms of technology, for example, at various times fax machines, television, radio, mobile phones, the internet have all been either banned or subject to restricted use; their limited association with non-members, often extending to endogamy and employment; and especially their strict rules on 'table fellowship', whereby Brethren may only partake in meals with those with whom they participate in the Lord's Supper, that is, those in good moral standing within the local Brethren assembly.<sup>17</sup> While these practices have generally elicited little more than raised eyebrows in the wider community, the Brethren practices of penitential discipline such as shutting-up and putting out or withdrawal, have resulted in the group periodically being labelled by politicians and the media as a 'cult' with all the associated baggage this term entails; ranging from excessive government, legal and media scrutiny

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<sup>13</sup> Introvigne and Masselli, *The Brethren*, pp. 53-72; Arthur C. Piepkorn, 'Plymouth Brethren (Christian Brethren)', *Concordia Theological Monthly*, vol. 41 (1970), pp. 165-171.

<sup>14</sup> This situation has largely resulted from the bad publicity the PBCC have attracted since the late 1950s. The standard view expressed by many other Brethren historians is well summarized by the words of Harold H. Rowdon, *Who are the Brethren and Does it Matter* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), p. 13, "The term 'Brethren' became associated with crack-pot regulations, ostracism of non-conforming relatives, broken marriages and broken homes, inhumanity and even suicide."

<sup>15</sup> Bryan R. Wilson, 'A Sect at Law', in *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1992), pp. 87-102.

<sup>16</sup> The term 'unequally yoked' refers to their understanding of 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

<sup>17</sup> David V. Barrett, 'The Exclusive Brethren', in *Sects, 'Cults' and Alternative Religions: A World Survey and Sourcebook*, ed. David V. Barrett (London: Blanford, 1996); Wilson, 'The Exclusive Brethren', p. 321.

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to mistrust and prejudice from the general public.<sup>18</sup> Former members have also accused them of 'breaking up families' and perpetrating various other abuses.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Setting**

In order to understand how the Brethren have achieved their current notoriety in Australia we must briefly look at a series of events which begun in 2004. On a quiet evening in 2004, Andrew Wilkie, then an Australian intelligence officer turned whistle-blower over the Iraq War, addressed an audience at the Returned and Services League club in the Sydney suburb of Gladesville. Wilkie's aim, as a candidate for the Australian Greens as he was at the time, was to challenge incumbent Prime Minister John Howard in his electorate of Bennelong, which the latter had held for the Liberal Party since 1974. That night a series of audience members heckled Wilkie with questions about his personal values and attitude towards Greens leader Senator Bob Brown's open homosexuality.<sup>20</sup> Unknown at the time, but later revealed across various Australian media over the 2005-2007 period, was that these hecklers were not just any group of Liberal Party supporters but leading members of the Exclusive Brethren, and included both a brother and a son of current world leader Bruce D. Hales. Hitherto a relatively unknown group, it would be fair to say that in many ways the Exclusive Brethren crossed a line that night which instigated their belated entry into what scholars sometimes call the 'cult wars'<sup>21</sup> and which since has made them 'good copy' in the Australian media.

What has followed since that fateful night has been a series of media exposés and political controversies surrounding this traditionally private and non-voting group's significant and often concealed financial contributions to socially conservative political parties worldwide, at times sparking bitter public debates on whether or not their

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<sup>18</sup> James T. Richardson, 'Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative', *Review of Religious Research*, vol. 34, no. 4 (1993), pp. 348-356.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the biographies of ex-members and journalistic accounts like Norman Adams, *Goodbye, Beloved Brethren* (Aberdeen: Impulse Books, 1972); Marion Field, *Shut Up Sarah* (Surrey: Highland Books, 1996); David Tchappat, *Breakout: How I Escaped From the Exclusive Brethren* (Auckland: New Holland Publishers, 2008); and Ngairé Thomas, *Behind Closed Doors: A Startling Story of Exclusive Brethren Life* (Auckland: Random House, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> David Marr, 'Hidden Prophets', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 1, 2006, p. 23; 'The Brethren Express', *Four Corners* (Melbourne: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, October 15, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> The term 'cult wars' is often used by scholars to describe a series of often bitter episodes across the globe since the 1970s surrounding alarmist media reports, attempts at government intervention, legal battles and scholarly debates regarding minority religious groups. See, for example, Susan Palmer, 'Caught Up in the Cult Wars: Confessions of a Canadian Researcher', in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, eds Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pp. 99-122.

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separatist religious scruples have a place in multicultural Australia.<sup>22</sup> In the course of this controversy numerous claims have been made about the Brethren, including accusations of aggressive litigation, special government treatment and exemptions, money-laundering, child abuse, intimidating journalists, and most recently the so-called 'Brethren Invasion' of rural and semi-rural areas across Australia. Claims-makers have emerged from the diverse social and ideological spectrum of the Australian community and have campaigned through parliament, public oversight bodies, the media, and even public rallies against the actions (and sometimes even the mere presence) of this small religious group whose history in Australia dates back nearly two centuries.<sup>23</sup>

The results of this on-going controversy have been mixed. While the Brethren have achieved some legal victories in their attempts to build new meeting halls in rural and semi-rural communities across Australia, these have been at best pyrrhic victories. Despite showing a willingness to compromise with and reassure local communities and make numerous modifications in planning,<sup>24</sup> these conciliatory gestures have not always been welcomed by some angry locals who see any Brethren building in their vicinity as a threat. As one resident of the southern Sydney suburb of Heathcote said to journalists on Channel Nine's program *A Current Affair* (2012): "They're a risk to everybody, they don't talk to anybody, they're just an isolated little community who want to go up the top of there and destroy the whole way of life of everybody." While negative newspaper coverage of the group has largely ceased from 2009, coverage since has shifted to high-rating television news and current affairs bulletins, which appear nightly on the commercial Channel Seven and Channel Nine networks, whose reputation for both tabloidization and targeting minority religious groups is well founded.<sup>25</sup> The Brethren have all but lost any special exemptions they previously received with regard to industrial relations policy, and their allegedly aggressive legal strategies in the Family Court continue to be carefully scrutinized.<sup>26</sup> In terms of some of the more shocking claims it

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Coultan, 'Power wielded from the fringes', *The Age*, September 23, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> 'The Exclusive Brethren', in *Many Faiths One Nation*, ed. Ian Gillman (Sydney: Collins, 1988), pp. 200-202.

<sup>24</sup> Terry Collins, 'Brethren seek permission to build bigger hall', *Central Coast Express*, March 17, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> James T. Richardson, 'Journalistic bias toward new religious movements in Australia', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1996), pp. 289-302. On the issue of 'tabloidization' see Graham Turner, *Ending the Affair: The Decline of Television Current Affairs in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Mischa Schubert, 'Exclusive Brethren lose workplace exemptions', *The Age*, March 19, 2009, p. 12; and Louise Thornthwaite, 'Separatist religious sects, the Family Law Act and shared parenting: An examination of cases involving the Exclusive Brethren', *Australian Journal of Family Law*, vol. 25 (2011), pp. 1-15.

should be said that to date one (now former) member of the Exclusive Brethren has been convicted of child sexual abuse in Australia, and another has been convicted of intimidating a television crew from *Today Tonight*.<sup>27</sup> Having established this brief chronology of events it is now important to look more specifically at the social and political context of the Howard era (1996-2007) and how contingent factors in this period provide the social context for the Brethren Cult Controversy.

### **The Social Context: God and Government under Howard**

While it was later discovered that the Brethren's first escapades into political funding occurred as far back as the ill-fated 1993 electoral campaign of Liberal prime-ministerial hopeful John Hewson it was in their support of Howard that members of this group first showed their political stripes with any vigour. It is in that social and political context that the Brethren's rise to media prominence and public controversy must be judged. Before this time controversies over the Brethren's separationist teachings and practices had occasionally come to the fore and it must be said that the strong rhetoric of broken families and rigorist discipline, which has become commonplace in the Brethren Cult Controversy, owes a great deal to the international controversies of the 1960s, following then-leader James Taylor Junior's (1899-1970) introduction of a series of increasingly stringent regulations for Brethren to facilitate their separationist beliefs.<sup>28</sup> Since the 1960s, media reports or controversies surrounding the Brethren have been relatively localized and short-lived,<sup>29</sup> with the marked exception of the infamous 'Aberdeen Incident' in 1970, when Taylor was allegedly found in a compromised position with a married female member in Aberdeen, Scotland and as a result up-to eight thousand members left the group.<sup>30</sup>

Bearing these sporadic historical controversies in mind, it is important to note that since 2002, even critical ex-members and journalists have noted some change when leadership passed from John Hales (1922-2002) to his son Bruce D. Hales, with a more conciliatory policy to ex-members being instituted and even some attempts at improving

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<sup>27</sup> Geeshe Jacobsen, 'Brethren member guilty of indecently assaulting girl, 10', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 14, 2006, p. 3; 'Brethren member intimidated TV crew', *The Age*, October 22, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Scotland, 'The Exclusive Brethren', pp. 91-116; Shuff, *Searching for the True Church*, pp. 223-255.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Tonts, 'The Exclusive Brethren and an Australian Rural Community', *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 17 (2001), pp. 309-322.

<sup>30</sup> On the so-called "Aberdeen Incident" see Adams, *Goodbye, Beloved Brethren*. It should be noted that Adams later acknowledged the one-sided nature of his account in a letter to Brethren in the United Kingdom. For a different perspective see Introvigne and Maselli, *The Brethren*, p. 68. For primary documents see Shuff, *Searching for the True Church*, pp. 266-268.



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public awareness through media interviews with leadership figures and spokespeople, and the hiring of a public relations firm.<sup>31</sup> This may be viewed sociologically as a period of marked reduction of 'sectarian tension'. What also appears to have changed is that Brethren members have modified their historical apolitical stance to become more involved, on a relatively grass-roots and individual member basis, in political campaigning and lobbying despite their objection to voting even in countries like Australia where voting is compulsory. It should be noted that Brethren have historically approached government on issues of 'conscientious objection' with regard to not just voting, but union membership, military service, and jury duty. What appears to have changed is the involvement of Brethren members in partisan political funding and third-party political advertising. It is this latter aspect of Brethren interactions with the surrounding culture that is the single most crucial factor in understanding the Brethren Cult Controversy.

Despite earlier public concerns from across the Tasman Sea surrounding the 2005 New Zealand general election,<sup>32</sup> and Greens party members in Bennelong and others long-knowing of Brethren involvement in the 2004 Howard campaign, the Brethren Cult Controversy only really took off in Australia in 2006. The instigating factor was the discovery of a series of anti-Greens political pamphlets with slogans like: "Are you aware of the policies hidden behind the environmental veneer?" Such pamphlets slammed a series of Greens policies regarding same-sex marriage and adoption, illegal drugs, the economy, health, and contained a strong anti-LGBT message.<sup>33</sup> While the pamphlets purported to be from "a group of concerned Tasmanian families" it was very quickly discovered that two northern Tasmanian farmers were responsible and that they (like a

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<sup>31</sup> See Bachelard, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren*, pp. 41-44; Tchappatt, *Breakout*, p. 237; Thomas, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 29; and Vanessa Walker, 'Reclusive sect lifts hopes on contact', *The Australian*, March 31, 2003, p. 7. Many ex-members, however, view these internal reforms with suspicion as indicated in these sources (all are, at best, ambivalent). For a more critical approach see the ex-Brethren website: <http://peebs.net/>, accessed 28 April 2013.

<sup>32</sup> The situation in New Zealand, while interesting, is not directly relevant to this article. See Nicky Hagar, *The Hollow Men: A Study in the Politics of Deception* (Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2006), pp. 18-39. On the Exclusive Brethren in New Zealand generally, see Peter Lineham, 'Exclusive Brethren in New Zealand', unpublished paper from the *New Zealand Historical Association Annual Conference*, November 23-25, 2007, Wellington, New Zealand. My thanks are due to Professor Lineham for kindly sending me a copy of this paper and for sharing his knowledge of the Brethren movement.

<sup>33</sup> The pamphlets were later declared defamatory after a concerted campaign by the trans-gender activist Martine Delaney, and those involved publicly apologized. They can be viewed (along with other relevant material) at the 'The Brethren Express', *Four Corners* (2007), website: <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2007/s2060266.htm>, accessed 28 April 2013.

number on Tasmania's so-called 'Northern Bible-Belt') were members of the Exclusive Brethren.<sup>34</sup>

On election night, state Greens leader Peg Putt drew loud interjections and booing from a crowd of disappointed Greens supporters when she began complaining about the sinister forces behind the scenes in what she described as the "grubbiest campaign the Greens have ever seen." Putt went on to call the Brethren a "right-wing sect" and "cowards" in a dramatic show of what some more conservative commentators at the time saw as post-election rhetoric and apportioning of blame.<sup>35</sup> What Putt's speech also revealed, however, was the powerful rhetorical role the Brethren were to play in Greens campaigns at a federal and state level over the next eighteen months, with her calling for an overhaul of Tasmania's significantly less stringent political funding disclosure laws, and labelling the involvement of many (anti-Greens) lobbyists as a sign of the "fragility of our democracy."<sup>36</sup> At the Federal level, then Greens leader Senator Bob Brown and fellow Greens Senator Christine Milne formed a united front in blaming the Exclusive Brethren for their electoral misfortunes in Tasmania, and retrospectively for the 2004 Federal election.

This event and the earlier international revelations that it was not the only time, nor indeed the only place, where members of the Exclusive Brethren had secretly funded socially conservative political campaigns, may have gone relatively unnoticed in previous years (as it had during the 1993 Hewson campaign) were it not for its international scope and clandestine nature. However, in the context of John Howard's third term as Prime Minister of Australia a number of contingent political and social factors also contributed to its newsworthiness; not least the bitter enmity it caused between the normally tolerant Greens and the Exclusive Brethren. In order to understand this situation better it is worth surveying some of these factors.

Howard's time in power had seen what many commentators saw as a marked shift in the role played by religious groups (mainly Christian) in influencing Australian government policy.<sup>37</sup> While Australia has a long history of religious groups taking an

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew Denholm and Padraic Murphy, 'Brethren and the bearpit', *The Australian*, March 27, 2006, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> 'Pointing the finger of blame', *The Hobart Mercury*, March 25, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> 'Greens rail against "grubby" campaign', *ABC News*, March 18, 2006. At: <http://www.abc.net.au/elections/tas/2006/news/stories/1595269.htm?elections/tas/2006/>, accessed 28 April 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Amanda Lohrey, *Voting for Jesus: Christianity and Politics in Australia* (Sydney: Schwartz, 2006). Marion Maddox, *God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005). Stephen Mutch, 'Religion in Australian Politics: A Surfacing Debate', *Australian*

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often partisan interest in Australian politics at both a State and Federal level, the Howard years saw a shift away from the mainstream churches, who often proved to be critical of various Coalition (the allied Liberal and National parties) policies, to favouring and courting socially conservative and economically neoliberal Evangelical organizations like the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL). This rise of what Marion Maddox called the Australian 'Christian Right' reached its symbolic apogee with the election, through a complex set of political preference deals, of Steve Fielding to the Australian Senate in 2004 with only 2% of the primary vote. Fielding, representing the Family First Party (FFP), a party with strong links to the Assemblies of God Pentecostal denomination (whose largest affiliate, the Hillsong Church, already sported a number of Coalition politicians as members) raised the ire of not only Senator Bob Brown, who viewed the FFP as a conservative force aimed squarely at eliminating the Greens' minority influence in the Australian Senate,<sup>38</sup> but over the course of Howard's final term, numerous social commentators of various ideological persuasions mused over the propriety of the increasingly public Christian influence and rhetoric in Australian politics.<sup>39</sup> For many fairly ineffectual Christian political parties like the FFP and the public espousals of faith by various members of the major parties were tolerable affronts, but the clandestine political involvement of the Exclusive Brethren, a Christian sect who refused to vote, was anathema.

Whether or not one agrees entirely with Maddox's portrait of the situation, her book *God Under Howard* (2005) and related books like Amanda Lohrey's *Voting for Jesus* (2006) proved popular and thought-provoking and put issues of religion and politics firmly on the public agenda.<sup>40</sup> Coupled with earlier controversies over John Howard's appointment of Peter Hollingworth, an Anglican Archbishop, as Governor-General, his staunch defence and support of private religious schools, and the Liberal Party's courting of groups like Hillsong and the ACL, many Australians became concerned about the relationship between Church and State and whether the Howard government was

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*Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 5 (2004), pp. 15-40. John Warhurst, 'Religion and Politics in the Howard Decade', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2007), pp. 19-32.

<sup>38</sup> Bob Brown, 'Outrageous Senate Outcome', Press Release, November 2, 2004. At: <http://bob-brown.greensmps.org.au/content/media-releases/outrageous-senate-outcome-brown>, accessed 24 April 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Adams, 'Crusader, not just a God-botherer', *The Australian*, October 23, 2007, p. 16. Leslie Cannold, 'There shouldn't be one law for religions, another for the rest', *The Age*, October 13, 2006, p. 15. Emma Tom, 'The big trouble with God is he attracts a bad crowd', *The Australian*, October 4, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Rodney Smith, 'How would Jesus Vote? The Churches and the Election of the Rudd Government', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2009), pp. 613-837.

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allowing Christian groups to dictate policy decisions.<sup>41</sup> The linking of Howard and many of his outspoken Christian colleagues directly with the Exclusive Brethren did not just provide one more link in this chain, but became the example of allegedly anti-democratic religious intrigue *par excellence* which could be frequently cited by opponents of all shades to attack the Howard government or question the involvement of other controversial religious groups in Australian politics.

The Brethren's support of Howard, however, was both ideological (theological) and pragmatic. We cannot understand the extent of the Brethren Cult Controversy without seeing what the Brethren believed they had to gain by supporting Howard and attacking the Greens. While it may be an exaggeration, there does appear to be some truth to the statement made by ex-member Bob Hales to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Four Corners* episode 'Brethren Express' that, "the Brethren see John Howard basically as their hero." The original Brethren financial support for Howard in 2004 was not purely provoked, as some commentators and critics have suggested, because, as Peter Lineham said in the same episode, they "in some sense believe that the government of Bush and Howard and the like can appropriately protect their interests and the interests of Christendom, and only after that will there be the turmoil that will lead to the Rapture and the end of the world." Nor was it some other theological-ideological agenda directly influenced by the Christian Right (though one must concede that eschatological concerns have traditionally been of great significance among Brethren). Rather, the Brethren, who operated 33 schools for their children as well as a variety of groups associated with the 2,661 other private schools, were disturbed by Australian Labor Party (ALP) leader Mark Latham's 'class-warrior' rhetoric, which targeted private school funding.<sup>42</sup> Further, the Coalition's 1996 Workplace Relations Act legislation had continued long-standing provisions for the Brethren to disavow union membership and to prevent union right of entry provisions being used to enter Brethren workplaces (with under twenty employees), provisions which have their roots as far back as in the 1940s as a form of conscientious objection.<sup>43</sup> These provisions were strengthened, however, in the Workplace Relations Amendment Act 2005 (the infamous 'Work Choices' legislation) by removing the provision that employees in such a situation agree to the employer's application for

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<sup>41</sup> Tom Frame, *Church and State: Australia's Imaginary Wall* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Mutch, 'Religion in Australian Politics', pp. 15f; Stephen Mutch 'Cultish Religious Sects and Politics: The Brethren v. Green Contest and Other Controversies Involving Minor Religious Sects Down Under', *Cultic Studies Review*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2007), pp. 298-310.

<sup>43</sup> New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board, *Discrimination and Religious Conviction* (Sydney: The Board, 1984), p. 112.

exemption. Brown, together with political commentators and opponents of the Coalition, viewed this minor change as *quid pro quo* for Brethren support of Howard during his 2004 campaign, with one commentator calling it “the Exclusive Brethren clause.”<sup>44</sup>

As aforementioned, the issue of electoral reform also brought the Brethren into the spotlight when the Senate debated the Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2006 in June. From the beginning of the heated debates over the bill’s aim to increase the disclosure threshold for third-party political donations from \$1,500 to \$10,000 the Greens frequently cited the concealment tactics of the Brethren as a powerful rhetorical argument for opposing this bill even though the matter of Brethren guilt in hiding disclosures was still under investigation by the Australian Electoral Commission.<sup>45</sup> Finally, in terms of social policies, Howard was a staunch conservative and opposed to any kind of amendment to the Marriage Act 1961 that would recognize same-sex partnerships.<sup>46</sup> In 2004, in response to changes in the United Kingdom, the Howard government introduced the Marriage Amendment Act 2004, which explicitly excluded same-sex couples from marriage in Australia or recognition of same-sex marriages conducted overseas. This issue again came to a head in June 2006 when the Federal government advised the Governor-General to disallow the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Civil Unions Act 2006, which had been passed on May 11 in the ACT Legislative Assembly.

This unprecedented move to quash a territorial law by the Federal Government drew heavy criticism from all sides of parliament and a Senate motion against it on June 15 2006 was only narrowly defeated (30-32) with ACT Federal Coalition Senator Gary Humphreys crossing the floor. During the debate leading up to this vote Senator Brown again utilized the example of the Brethren (who he had recently met with) to demonstrate his opposition to what he labelled “a mixture ... of ancient dogma, which we should have long gone past, and a tendency to discrimination which should have been left in the middle of the last century at the latest.”<sup>47</sup> The Brethren’s political involvements raised a number of other public policy issues, some of which were not to come to the fore until after the late 2007 change of government, for example, charitable status and education funding.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Australia, Senate, *Debates*, vol. S8, 2006, pp. 74f; Mark Davis, ‘Brethren bosses better armed against the comrades’, *The Australian Financial Review*, April 3, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Australia, Senate, *Debates*, vol. S6, 2006, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Maddox, *God Under Howard*, 43-46; Carol Johnson, ‘John Howard’s “Values” and Australian Identity’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2007), pp. 195-209.

<sup>47</sup> Australia, Senate, *Debates*, vol. S5, 2006, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Mutch, ‘Cultish Religious Sects and Politics’, pp. 298-310.

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The Brethren's campaigning, however, was not all in the form of pragmatic pro-Howard pamphleteering and it must be noted that it also contained a more sinister and controversial aspect. Most notable here were the aforementioned anti-Greens pamphlets that appeared in the 2006 Tasmanian state election. While eschewing blatantly theological language, these leaflets clearly showed the Brethren's moral stamp, specifically criticizing Greens policies supporting same-sex marriage, abortion, and a more-liberal approach toward drugs. It had become quite clear from these pamphlets, and their New Zealand equivalents, that, to quote historian Peter Lineham, "Exclusive Brethren throughout the world are fulminating about Greens policies which they see as perfidious, they see them as evil in their very essence."<sup>49</sup> Such pamphlets alone, of course, are common in electoral campaigns though the tone of these particular examples drew sharp criticism from not only the Greens but also from LGBT activists like Martine Delaney and Rodney Croome.<sup>50</sup> What exacerbated the effect were the actions which accompanied them, with Brethren members allegedly cruising the streets of Hobart on election day towing anti-greens slogans and wearing sinister pig masks.<sup>51</sup>

It must be noted that many of these issues were far from new. The Brethren's refusal to join unions has a long history and they were far from alone among the 'Christian Right' (or the mainstream churches) in their opposition to same-sex marriage, abortion, or supporting Howard's policies on private schools. This said, all these issues became far more controversial during the Howard years as a direct result of his policies, and it cannot be denied that at times the Brethren benefitted; though it should be noted that far larger and more influential groups also benefitted and the issue cannot easily be reduced to collusion as often claimed.<sup>52</sup> What was new here was the level of Brethren involvement, which ran directly counter to the group's traditionally apolitical approach, which dates back to the teachings of J. N. Darby (1800-1882).<sup>53</sup> The reasons for this shift are complex and in need of further study, however, it suffices to say here that the increasing

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<sup>49</sup> 'The Brethren Express', *Four Corners* (2007)

<sup>50</sup> Matthew Denholm, 'Sect's attack ads billed to Libs', *The Australian*, January 25, 2007, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Lohrey, *Voting for Jesus*, p. 51.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Bachelard, 'Politics and the Exclusive Brethren', in *The Australian Book of Atheism* ed. Warren Bonett (Melbourne: Scribe, 2010), pp. 285-298. Many big and small businesses had much to gain from the relaxed industrial protections and employment security of the 'Work Choices' legislation, unlike workers who staged massive protests across the country. However, it is important to note that many of the businesses to benefit here were substantially larger political donors to both the Liberal and Labor parties than the Exclusive Brethren. For more information see the AEC website (where all donor disclosures are available), <http://www.aec.gov.au/>, accessed 28 April 2013.

<sup>53</sup> See John Nelson Darby, 'Progress of Democratic Power, and its Effects on the Moral state of England', in *The Collected Writings of John Nelson Darby*, vol. 32 (London: G. Morrish, 1867-1900), pp. 333-336.

concentration of Brethren money into independent small-business and the internalized flow of capital utilized to fund their schools and other community projects have certainly made the Brethren more susceptible to the vicissitudes of the market-orientated 'world',<sup>54</sup> though it should be noted that direct partisan involvement seems to have been confined to a small contingent of 'leading brothers' rather than spread across the entire movement.<sup>55</sup>

The Brethren's status as the quintessential example of what Bryan Wilson labelled an "introversionist sect,"<sup>56</sup> their controversial history, the consistent rolling out of often shocking experiences of ex-members and their financial support of Howard did, however, work to turn this small group into political lepers. Similarly, their long-held position of not-voting further invoked a considerable degree of the popular ire in Australia where voting is compulsory.<sup>57</sup> The entire contingent factors discussed above overlapped during the period over 2006 to 2007 to bring the Brethren well and truly to the public's attention. Nonetheless, in order to understand the constructionist process of how this took place it is equally important to look at the various claims-makers who were involved.

### **Claims-Makers in the Brethren Cult Controversy**

The key moral entrepreneurs or claims-makers involved in the various phases of Brethren Cult Controversy have thus far included a quite broad constituency of different groups and over time the key *ownership* of the Brethren problem has passed through groups with diverse specific concerns and ideologies. Before looking in some depth at the role played by each of these groups, it is worth giving a brief broad overview of the claims-makers involved. While initial concerns about the Brethren's political donations were raised by investigative journalists like David Marr and Nicky Hager, its widespread publication was largely the result of the press releases and on-going Senate debates centred on Senator Bob Brown who particularly through 2006 and 2007 ensured that the issue was frequently raised during Senate debates and in the media.<sup>58</sup> Much of the

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<sup>54</sup> Bachelard, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren*, pp. 173-214.

<sup>55</sup> See Peter Lineham's comments in Nicola Shepherd, 'Exclusive Brethren – sects, secrets and lies', *The New Zealand Herald*, October 1, 2006. At: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10403777](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10403777), accessed 28 April 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Bryan R. Wilson, *Religious Sects* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), p. 136.

<sup>57</sup> Bernard Doherty, 'Quirky Neighbors or the Cult Next-Door? An Analysis of Public Perceptions of the Exclusive Brethren in Australia', *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2012), pp. 163-211.

<sup>58</sup> See for example, Australia, Senate, *Debates*, vol. S4, 2006, p. 48. See also Bob Brown, 'Cowardly Brethren will be investigated', Press Release, March 22, 2006. At: <http://bob-brown.greensmps.org.au/content/media-releases/cowardly-brethren-will-be-investigated-%C2%96-brown>, accessed 28 April 2013.



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ammunition, however, for both journalists and politicians has continually been provided by a small but vocal group of ex-Brethren members who have utilized media attention in attempts to expose their negative experiences; some of which dated as far back as the 1960s.

In addition to these groups we must also include media social commentators for whom Howard's hard-line policy on Islamic fundamentalism, for instance, was seen as hypocritical when compared with his courting of the 'Christian Right'.<sup>59</sup> Finally, since 2010 we need to note the grass-roots campaigns against the Brethren which have occurred following the series of proposed Brethren meeting-halls or schools in rural or semi-rural areas; dubbed by the tabloid media as the "Brethren Invasion."<sup>60</sup> While the number of 84 communities given recently by *Today Tonight* is misleading, there have certainly been vociferous and often bitter grass-roots campaigns which have attracted (and probably been exacerbated by) widespread coverage on tabloid television programs like *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*.

### *Politicians*

The international connections between environmentally based Greens parties provided the first hint of the Brethren controversy in Australia when in September 2005 Bob Brown visited fellow Greens politicians in New Zealand and a group of ex-Brethren, now Greens supporters. The involvement of Brethren members in authorizing a series of anti-Greens and anti-Labour pamphlets, which had been distributed in key electorates often with sizable Brethren constituencies, was exposed.<sup>61</sup> Seizing an opportunity to challenge the Australian Coalition government, and raise the perennial issue of political transparency, Brown first mentioned the Brethren political donations in a press release and during the Senate sitting on September 12 of 2005.<sup>62</sup> While his speech gained little media attention in Australia, at the time it did put the Coalition on notice that their (then only alleged) links to the Exclusive Brethren were under review and that the similarities

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<sup>59</sup> Adams, 'Crusader, not just a God botherer'; Piers Akerman, 'Radical plan for a world of pain', *Daily Telegraph*, January 30, 2007; Adele Horin, 'Must double standards be met, too?' *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 30, 2006, p. 33; and Hugh Mackay, 'Soul-searching for atheists and believers alike', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 6, 2007, p. 30.

<sup>60</sup> 'Brethren Invasion', *A Current Affair* (Melbourne: Channel Nine Australia, February 8, 2012).

<sup>61</sup> Hagar, *The Hollow Men: A Study in the Politics of Deception*, pp. 18-39.

<sup>62</sup> Bob Brown, 'Exclusive Brethren money for Howard, Bush, Brash campaigns questioned', Press Release, September 12 2005. At: <http://bob-brown.greensmps.org.au/content/media-releases/exclusive-brethren-money-howard-bush-brash-campaigns-questioned>, accessed 28 April 2013.



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between the New Zealand campaign and the 2004 Tasmanian federal campaign had been duly noted (along with the involvement of some of the same political strategists).

Following the revelations of March 2006 that anti-Greens pamphlets linked to the Brethren had appeared before the Tasmanian poll the Greens again became increasingly vocal and took every opportunity to bring the topic of the Exclusive Brethren into Senate debates. By October 2006 they had put the entire Coalition ministry on notice about meeting with the Brethren, and throughout 2007 and into 2008 one-by-one Howard's ministers lined up to either deny or tacitly confirm (and in some cases defend) meetings with the Brethren.<sup>63</sup> Brown and his Greens colleagues, while certainly persistent and vociferous, were not the only politicians to involve themselves in these debates and claims-makers on both the major sides of parliament attempted to gain political capital by involving themselves over the 2006-2007 period.

On the conservative Coalition side, Senator Eric Abetz was quick to defend the Brethren against Brown's claims using Brown's attacks to cast aspersions about what the Coalition claims are the Greens' "totalitarian tendencies,"<sup>64</sup> whilst Prime Minister John Howard, Treasurer Peter Costello and a number of other ministers all publicly admitted to meeting with the Brethren and defended such meetings as their democratic duty.<sup>65</sup> In what can be seen as one of the most bizarre role reversals of the Howard era, the Coalition found itself defending the rights of a minority while the Greens found themselves engaged in what was increasingly coming to resemble a witch-hunt; a point which even their erstwhile political ally, the Australian Democrats leader Andrew Bartlett, conceded.<sup>66</sup> On the progressive side of the political divide, Labor MPs made much of the meetings between Coalition members and Brethren lobbyists, for instance, Anthony Albanese raised Howard's Brethren meetings in parliament as early as March 1 2007 and again raised them during the 2007 election campaign.<sup>67</sup> However, the most repeated quote over the course of the Brethren Cult Controversy was that of soon-to-be Prime Minister Kevin Rudd when in the lead-up to the November 2007 poll he commented that: "I believe that this is an extremist cult and sect [and] I also believe that it breaks up families."<sup>68</sup> More recently politicians like independent Senator Nick

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<sup>63</sup> Australia, Senate, *Debates*, vol. S13, 2005, p. 27.

<sup>64</sup> Australia, Senate, *Debates*, vol. S13, 2005, p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> Bachelard, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren*, pp. 183-185.

<sup>66</sup> Australia, Senate, *Debates*, vol. S8, 2006, p. 62.

<sup>67</sup> Australia, House of Representatives, *Debates*, vol. HR3, 2007, p. 83. See also Phillip Coorey, 'Brethren still a cult in Rudd's book', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 23, 2007, p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> 'Rudd won't meet "extremist" Brethren', *ABC News*, August 22, 2007. At:

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Xenophon and NSW Greens parliamentarian John Kaye have been more pragmatic, appearing in the media to question the substantial funding Brethren schools have received due to their ostensibly religious or charitable nature.<sup>69</sup> In March 2010, when matters of charitable status and accusations of widespread abuse were debated in the Senate with reference to the Church of Scientology, Greens Senators Brown and Milne used this opportunity to once again attack the Brethren with rhetoric almost identical to that which they employed over the course of the 2006-2007 Senate debates.<sup>70</sup> Curiously, and certainly worthy of further study, the Brethren together with various Islamic groups and the Church of Scientology have increasingly featured together in various media exposés as ‘religious threats’ by both the media and political secularists.<sup>71</sup>

### *Ex-Brethren Members*

As with most controversies regarding minority religions, the largest single source of damning information and damaging claims about the Brethren has been filtered through a number of vocal former members; all of whom continue to hold the Brethren responsible for family and personal tragedies, many dating back to the 1960s. Most of the controversial stories regarding the Brethren can be traced directly to these individuals and many of them are quite harrowing. One ex-member, for instance, contacted Michael Bachelard after his initial story in September 2006 and by Bachelard’s own admission served as his guide through “the intricacies of the topic.”<sup>72</sup> Another ex-member, as was revealed on *Four Corners*’ ‘Separate Lives’ (2006) documentary mentioned a score of suicides of Brethren members, a theme that has been a recurrent criticism since the 1960s.<sup>73</sup>

Other examples of stories from ex-members have included revelations about the large (and often cash) tithes provided monthly by Brethren faithful. These claims can be traced to a defector who was expelled from the sect in 1984, and who has not seen his

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<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-08-22/rudd-wont-meet-extremist-brethren/647626>, accessed 28 April 2013.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Exclusive Brethren School Fund Scandal’, *Today Tonight* (Melbourne: Channel Seven Australia, August 3, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> Australia, Senate, *Debates*, vol. S3, 2010, pp. 1603f.

<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, Mutch, ‘Religion in Australian Politics’, p. 18. On the media’s attacks on the Church of Scientology see Bernard Doherty, ‘Is there room for Scientology amid Australia’s Religious Diversity?’ *ABC Religion and Ethics*, March 20, 2012. At:

<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/03/20/3459702.htm>, accessed 28 April 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Bachelard, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren*, p. 297.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Separate Lives’ (Melbourne: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 16 September, 2006).

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children since.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, the accusations of covering up sexual assaults and child abuse aired on *Four Corners* came from a member who left the group in 1968, but who has been a vocal critic appearing not only on *Four Corners* but also the tabloid television programs *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight*, in addition to writing to newspapers regarding articles on the Brethren.<sup>75</sup> This list of hurt ex-members goes on, and a number both in Australia and abroad have penned biographical accounts of their lives in the Brethren over the past fifty years.

While an outspoken and organized network of ex-members exists, some have also joined forces with Australian anti-cult groups in publicizing their experiences.<sup>76</sup> For instance, Peter Flinn, in addition being a former Brethren member, is president of the local Victorian branch of Australia's largest cult-watch organization Cult Information and Family Awareness (CIFS), and wrote directly to Prime Minister Rudd on behalf of thirty-three ex-members about the issue in 2008 to urge government action.<sup>77</sup> The on-going tabloid television and newspaper coverage has certainly led to a snowballing effect, with more and more ex-members coming forward to speak negatively about their former faith and, perhaps inevitably, with some individuals making false claims.<sup>78</sup>

### *Journalists and Commentators*

A number of individual journalists of Australia's elite newspapers have frequently commented on the Brethren, including respected commentators like David Marr from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tasmanian correspondent Matthew Denholm from *The Australian*, and *The Age*'s religion columnist Barney Schwartz and investigative reporter Michael Bachelard. Coupled with these print journalists have been the campaigns by numerous reporters from tabloid television programs *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*, and Quentin McDermott from the ABC's *Four Corners*, whose two documentaries

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Bachelard and Christian Catalano, 'Brethren reaping millions tax free', *The Age*, September 23, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Doherty, 'Quirky Neighbors or the Cult Next-Door?' p. 168, note 8.

<sup>76</sup> For example, 'Cult Warning', *A Current Affair* (Melbourne: Channel Nine Australia, November 2, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Michael Bachelard, 'Rudd in Brethren inquiry about-face', *The Age*, May 18, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> While most ex-members appear to be very sincere there have been examples of dubious claims-makers. For example *Woman's Day* published an article entitled 'I escaped an Aussie sect' about an alleged ex-member for which the magazine was taken to the Press Council for adjudication. Details of this complaint and the Press Council adjudication are online. At:

<http://www.presscouncil.org.au/document-search/adjudication-no-1419-mcnaughton-w-day-march-2009/?LocatorGroupID=662&LocatorFormID=677&FromSearch=1>, accessed 28 April 2013.

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‘Separate Lives’ and ‘The Brethren Express’ acted as the launching pad for much of the subsequent coverage.

In addition to these investigative journalists should also be added a number of media commentators who were also drawn to the topic. Media commentators of diverse views, from feminist ethicist Leslie Cannold, to mild-mannered atheist Philip Adams, to *The Australian*’s fiery Emma Tom all had something to say on the forays of the Brethren into politics, their treatment of women, or their unusual strictures. On the more conservative side of the media, Piers Akerman of the *Daily Telegraph* chided what he viewed as the Greens’ double-standard in attacking the Brethren whilst being allegedly soft on Islamic fundamentalism. Fellow controversialist Andrew Bolt was even more emphatic when he attacked the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s Adele Horin’s critical piece discussing the Brethren.<sup>79</sup> In more recent times, radio shock-jocks have joined in on the controversy, with Radio 2GB’s Chris Smith remarking to *A Current Affair* that the Brethren are a: “Dead-set cult that needs to be stopped from brainwashing so many children.”<sup>80</sup>

Bachelard has been the most vocal and often-cited media claims-maker. He published a considerable number of articles outlining numerous allegations of Brethren misbehaviour over the 2006-2008 period, and followed with his critically acclaimed book *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* in 2008. Bachelard has since become the major *owner* of the Brethren Cult Controversy, frequently appearing on talk shows and other media outlets as an expert on the group, and even giving an address at the 2011 CIFS conference.<sup>81</sup> While Bachelard has certainly done a very thorough and admirable job as an investigative journalist, his frequent reference to spurious anti-cult ideological positions and his at times quite anti-religious brand of atheism may have clouded his perspective. Likewise, other journalists may not have been without their own agendas when it came to covering the Brethren. For instance, David Marr, often savagely (and, more often than not, unfairly) attacked by conservatives like Akerman and Bolt for his ‘gay activism’, has emphasized the Brethren’s extremely homophobic attitudes, whilst feminist writers have noted the Brethren’s alleged mistreatment of women.<sup>82</sup> Ideological

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<sup>79</sup> Andrew Bolt. ‘It’s bad if they are Christians’, *Herald Sun Blog*, September 30, 2006. At: [http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/its\\_bad\\_if\\_they\\_are\\_christians/](http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/its_bad_if_they_are_christians/), accessed 28 April 2013.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Brethren Invasion’ *A Current Affair* (2012).

<sup>81</sup> Michael Bachelard, ‘Reporting on Cults: Rewards and Punishments’, *Cults in Australia*. Cult Information and Family Support Annual Conference, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia, November 2, 2011. At: <http://www.cifs.org.au/fateful.php>, accessed 28 April 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Cannold, ‘There shouldn’t be one law for religions, another for the rest’; Horin, ‘Must double standards be met, too?’; and Marr, ‘Hidden Prophets’.

interests have abounded on all sides of the media spectrum though one cannot help but admire the stalwart work done by journalists in this regard, particularly in the face of legal threats.<sup>83</sup> The explosion in this coverage, across mediums, as argued by the author elsewhere,<sup>84</sup> is quite staggering, and shows the effective way in which this diverse coalition of claims-makers have positively interacted with, and at times co-opted, the media to publicize their concerns.

### **Outcomes**

In terms of public awareness and influencing public opinion, it is clear that the claims-makers in the Brethren Cult Controversy have achieved a high degree of success. The horror stories of ex-members have continued to appear with some frequency (and repetition) both in print and on television since the controversy was first sparked in 2005. In addition to the repetition of core claims discussed above, it can also be noted that younger former members have since come forward with similar stories.<sup>85</sup> Politically the outcomes have been far more ambivalent. The exposure of Brethren members involved in funding Coalition campaign material certainly caused the already waning popularity of John Howard to further slide, and was certainly one element behind his landslide defeat in the 2007 election. On the other hand, with Howard's demise we can also observe the decline of the Exclusive Brethren's image as a political threat and a subsequent softening of the approach of some earlier critics; a factor perhaps helped by members of the Brethren making themselves far better known in what little campaigning took place during the 2007 election.<sup>86</sup> Notable here was Howard's successor as Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, who reneged on his earlier hard-line stance on the Brethren and even increased their already controversial schools funding, much to the ire of media commentators, Greens politicians and education union officials.<sup>87</sup>

In terms of government intervention and investigation, since the first stirrings in September 2005 two Senate calls for a government inquiry by Brown (and two related calls regarding the Church of Scientology by Xenophon) have been overwhelmingly rejected by the major political parties. In the end, neither the Australian Electoral Commission, Australian Federal Police nor the New Zealand Police proceeded with any

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<sup>83</sup> Bachelard, 'Reporting on Cults'.

<sup>84</sup> Doherty, 'Quirky Neighbors or the Cult Next-Door?'

<sup>85</sup> Tchappat, *Breakout*. See also, 'Insight from a Brethren insider', *A Current Affair* (Melbourne: Channel Nine Australia, February 25, 2011).

<sup>86</sup> Michael Bachelard, 'Sect joins Tasmania campaign', *The Age*, November 21, 2007, p. 8.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Bachelard, 'Politics and the Exclusive Brethren', pp. 285-298.

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prosecutions for electoral fraud against the Brethren noting that after investigation it was established that the Brethren had made all the necessary funding disclosures; a fact reported in only one major newspaper and in this case on page 6.<sup>88</sup> However, not all outcomes have been positive for the Brethren: as punishment for their 2006 Tasmanian electoral flyers the Brethren members responsible were forced to apologise to transgender activist Martine Delaney after they were found discriminatory by the Tasmanian anti-discrimination tribunal.<sup>89</sup> Since 2007 the issue has shifted from political donations to the far more complex issue of charitable status and the aforementioned issue of education funding. The Brethren, along with the equally controversial Church of Scientology, continue to be the target of Xenophon's calls for an overhaul of how tax exemptions for religious groups are determined. Members of the NSW Greens, such as Kaye, have also continued to raise concerns about the appropriateness of funding of Brethren schools.<sup>90</sup>

The most emphatic outcome of the Brethren Cult Controversy has been the impact on public opinion. While before 2005 few Australians knew who the Brethren were, they have since become a household name and a powerful example of what Stanley Cohen called "folk devils" on Australian television current affairs, a group whose very presence serves as "visible reminders of what we should not be."<sup>91</sup> While a marked drop in print coverage of the Brethren can be seen since the 2007 election period, this has been offset by a notable increase in the coverage on prime-time television news bulletins and especially on the commercial networks' nightly current affairs programs. Since 2008 the Brethren have been the subject of at least six reports on the Channel Seven's *Today Tonight*, and seventeen separate reports on Channel Nine's *A Current Affair*; a program who celebrates their historical 'cult-busting' record.<sup>92</sup>

Such widespread coverage has led to the maintenance of an influential inventory of images associated with the Brethren, which continues to be adopted in the highly-stylized and repetitious reports on tabloid television. The impact of this continued demonization can be seen in the Brethren's now almost fifty-year-old practice of regularly relocating their families and businesses to smaller towns.<sup>93</sup> At the time of writing controversies have occurred surrounding the siting of Brethren meeting houses or schools in a number

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<sup>88</sup> Michael Bachelard, 'Sect cleared over election', *The Age*, February 19, 2008, p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> Andrew Darby, 'Brethren members apologise over 'hatred' ads', *The Age*, August 20, 2009, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Kate Dennehy, 'Greens MP takes aim at PM's Brethren 'loophole'', *The Sun-Herald*, August 23, 2009, p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> 'Bizarre Cults Tearing Apart Australian Families', *A Current Affair* (Melbourne: Channel Nine Australia, July 22, 2008).

<sup>93</sup> Tonts, 'The Exclusive Brethren and an Australian rural community'.

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of regions including New South Wales in Lisarow on the Central Coast,<sup>94</sup> Llandilo near Penrith in the western outskirts of Sydney,<sup>95</sup> Heathcote in the south of Sydney,<sup>96</sup> West Pennant Hills in Sydney's Hill's District,<sup>97</sup> and Queensland in Gympie,<sup>98</sup> Manly West outside Brisbane,<sup>99</sup> and Bundaberg.<sup>100</sup> While these controversies have been launched by locals on ostensibly environmental grounds, the rhetoric of public fear over an unwanted 'cult next-door' is often not far below the surface, as one resident noted to *The Queensland Times*: "We don't need this in our street. I'm really cheesed off about it. The more you read about these people, the more you start to worry about what's going on."<sup>101</sup> This is certainly a topic worthy of further investigation.

### **Conclusion**

By applying insights and approaches from the constructionist approach to social problems it is possible to provide an alternative and/or augmented approach to perceived social problems. This article has argued that the Brethren Cult Controversy is far better understood as less of an objectively different situation than has existed since the 1960s, but rather as an increase in visibility and media effectiveness by claims-makers who found, at least temporarily, that the Brethren proved a useful group for pushing a series of political and ideological agendas. This increased public scrutiny has allowed many ex-members a public forum in which to voice their grievances against their former coreligionists, both reinforcing and augmenting the growing public concerns about this small and private religious group.

In terms of the near future it seems unlikely that media attention will abate given the Brethren's proven ratings potential and popularity of the ever-controversial image of 'cults'. As things stand at the time of writing, the Brethren are appealing the cancelling of their charity status by the United Kingdom Charities Commission, a case which is almost

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<sup>94</sup> Terry Collins, 'Brethren bid still standing residents "devastated" by council vote', *Central Coast Express*, April 13, 2012, p. 9.

<sup>95</sup> Caryn Metcalfe, 'Brethren seek a school – But Llandilo locals can't get houses, sheds approved', *Penrith Press*, February 5, 2010, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Jim Gainsford, 'Brethren Church project concerns residents', *St George & Sutherland Shire Leader*, January 11, 2012.

<sup>97</sup> Isabell Petrinic, 'West Pennant Hills Brethren plan withdrawn', *Hills News*, November 14, 2011.

<sup>98</sup> 'Residents outcry council yet to decide', *The Gympie Times*, July 15, 2010, p. 1.

<sup>99</sup> Kathleen Donaghy, 'Outrage at "invasion" – Residents rally against Exclusive Brethren plans to build churches in their suburbs', *The Sunday Mail*, July 25, 2010, p. 22.

<sup>100</sup> Lea Emery, 'A Bundaberg East home is about to take on a whole new spiritual life with...' *The News Mail*, January 28, 2012, p. 4.

<sup>101</sup> Brad Weier, 'The Brethren open doors – Residents fear new church at Brassall', *The Queensland Times*, July 27, 2010, p. 1.

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certain to bring further scrutiny in Australia and in such a situation the strong shift in public opinion facilitated by the Brethren Cult Controversy may indeed work to shift the political stalemate which has hitherto prevented the Australian federal government from closer scrutiny of unpopular minority religions.<sup>102</sup> In such a situation one can only hope that policy makers and bureaucrats are not overwhelmed by media images and that these issues are viewed in a careful manner. Otherwise, a media campaign which began predominantly with genuine and laudable concerns about political transparency, tolerance for LGBT communities, and accountability by the Greens and others may descend into the proverbial witch-hunt of a minority religious group. It is likely that, if reportage of this denomination is not scrupulous and unbiased, the Brethren will continue to attract labels like 'Australia's biggest cult' regardless of any efforts on their behalf to improve public perceptions.

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Bernard Doherty undertook graduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies at Macquarie University in Sydney in Australia where he currently works part-time teaching history. He also works as an adjunct lecturer in New Religions at St Mark's Theological Centre in Canberra. In addition to this Bernard works as an independent scholar researching New Religions in Australia. Bernard recently returned from a postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. His research focuses particularly on the interactions between New Religions and society, with an emphasis on the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of NRMs.

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<sup>102</sup> Christopher Hope, 'MPs want action over church hall charity ruling', *The Daily Telegraph (UK)*, December 19, 2012, p. 2.