

## Quirky Neighbors or the Cult Next-Door? An Analysis of Public Perceptions of the Exclusive Brethren in Australia

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### ABSTRACT

*Beginning in 2005 the tiny Christian sect then known as the Exclusive Brethren suddenly underwent a media transformation from a virtually unknown or ignored group of quirky and old-fashioned Protestant sectarians to being touted as “Australia’s biggest cult” by tabloid television programs. This explosion of controversy came on the heels of media revelations about the involvement of Brethren members in providing financial donations to conservative political causes across the globe and a snowballing effect in response which brought forth a number of ex-members eager to expose their former group. This article looks at how this media transformation has been received by the wider Australian public. By studying the hitherto little utilized data contained in readers’ letters to Australia’s three mainstream broadsheet newspapers this article identifies which events or undertakings had the most impact on public perceptions of the Exclusive Brethren and which specific articles and issues struck the most responsive chord with readers. This content analysis found that Australian public opinion toward the Exclusive Brethren, while on the whole negative, was more indicative of their political involvement than their beliefs. The study also found that prior to what I call “The Brethren Controversy” the Exclusive Brethren had maintained a high degree of “sectarian tension” in Australia for almost four decades with little public outcry or media vilification.*

### Keywords

Exclusive Brethren, media, newspapers, controversy, politics, church/state issues, sects, content analysis

## Introduction

I live in a leafy backwater called Ferntree Gully. When we moved here, we were warned by some people that directly opposite us was a place of worship used by the Exclusive Brethren. They also own a significant number of homes in our immediate vicinity. They have daily and nightly meetings, but we have not been disturbed by them at all. They manage their own off-street parking requirements, keep the noise down and behave as model members of the local community.

I am not a member of their group. They have never tried to influence me or my family. I actually know nothing about them except what they do by their actions. They live in harmony with their neighbours.

(*The Age*, 25 September 2006)

Government ministers' attempts to portray this sect in palatable terms fill former members with outrage. The heartbreak and tragedy caused to hundreds of families who have had the misfortune to cross swords with the Brethren is a result of its extremist cult practices. (*The Age*, 24 August 2007)

When is a cult not a cult and only a sect? When it canvasses for the Liberal Party, that's when. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 2007)

The three quotes above represent a few of the extremes found in readers' letters to Australian elite broadsheet newspapers between 2000 and 2010 concerning a series of controversies surrounding the small introversionist Christian sect then known as the Exclusive Brethren.<sup>1</sup> Before 2005 the Exclusive Brethren were generally seen as just one of a number of "Christian Brethren"<sup>2</sup> groups whose genealogy stretches back to debates which shook

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1. Due to their refusal to acknowledge themselves as a denomination (until early 2012 when they adopted the official name the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church), the group known as the "Exclusive Brethren" has been known by a variety of different names over the past fifty years. Bachelard gives a good survey of these (2008, vi) writing: "...the sect known in Australia and New Zealand as the Exclusive Brethren, and elsewhere variously as the Taylorites and the Raven-Taylor-Hales Brethren. The Jimmies, The Connexional Brethren, and Plymouth Brethren Number 4."

For the purposes of this article the terms "Exclusive Brethren" and "Brethren" are used interchangeably unless otherwise indicated.

2. The most well-known of these groups are the Plymouth Brethren, however, a number of others exist. For a brief introduction see Rowdon (1986). In Australia, Humphreys and Ward (1988) listed at least eight separate groups under Brethren and the *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (ABS) census from 2011 counted a total of 21,733 "Brethren" (less than 0.01% of the population). This number, however, included 109 different answers and so cannot easily be generalized for the "Exclusive" Brethren. More details on this data can be found in Hughes and Bond (2010) and Lineham (2009, 180–182).

the early nineteenth century Anglican church in both Britain and Ireland and, in particular, to those who adhered to the stern teachings of theologian, preacher, and controversialist John Nelson Darby concerning the rejection of an ordained priesthood, separation from both worldly and ecclesial evil, and awaiting the coming Rapture (Bachelard 2008; Bebbington 1989; Burnham 2004; Krapohl 1988; McDowell 1968; Melton 2008; Scotland 1997, 2000; Sandeen 1970; Shuff 2005; Wilson 1967, 2000). At this time in Australia, very few people even knew of the Brethren's existence unless they had direct experience with the group through one of numerous Brethren owned businesses scattered around the country or had been neighbors to the Brethren in cities or (more likely) country towns (Tonts 2001).<sup>3</sup>

In terms of classification the Exclusive Brethren are now often referred to as a "cult" by the media and general public, though this is misleading unless we use an extremely broad definition of "cult" like that proposed by Jenkins of a "small and unpopular religious group" (2000a, 18). Instead, it is best to see the Brethren as a "sect," both because they spurn a denominational identity, and because of their often extremely high level of tension with the surrounding society (Bainbridge and Stark 1980; Stark and Bainbridge 1986, 1987). To be more precise they are best classified as the quintessential example of what Wilson called an "introversionist" sect,<sup>4</sup> due to the fact that their doctrine of the "separation from evil" has become the *sine qua non* of Brethren community life (1967, 1970). Without going into specifics the Brethren take the words of 2 Timothy 2:19–23 literally and in order to preserve community integrity are at times willing to "withdraw from" or "cast out" members who threaten communal holiness by their perceived iniquities. The Brethren community believes

3. What little has been written, other than short journalistic articles, has largely been from members of various "Open Brethren" groups who have sought to distance themselves from the Exclusive Brethren since the 1960s (e.g. Lineham 2009; McDowell 1968; Shuff 2005). Rowdon (1986, 13) makes the reasons for this clear: "The term 'Brethren' became associated with crack-pot regulations, ostracism of non-conforming relatives, broken marriages and broken homes, inhumanity and even suicide."
4. Wilson (1970, 118) defines an "introversionist sect" as:

Although all sects separate from the orthodox and, at least in some respects, from the wider society, introversionist sects make this pattern of action their overriding concern, the issue on which salvation is to be realized. Being in the safety of the community becomes the symbol, and sometimes more than merely the symbol, of being in the safety of God. The individual feels safe in the fraternity, and thus the fraternity is the agency of the saving Christ. Individual holiness depends on community holiness; the community itself provides the reference for individual behavior. It becomes the object of adoration, being at once an objective entity, and a subjective experience. It presents the individual with a mystery that is awe-inspiring.

that as the objective manifestation of the “body of Christ” they can have no contact with evil lest the entire community be compromised.<sup>5</sup> Historically the maintenance of this high level of purity has led to the Brethren undergoing several periods of amplified tension. The most noted of these was during the tenure of leader James Taylor Junior (1953–1970) during the 1960s, when in response to the increasingly permissive nature of the 1960s era the Brethren’s strictures on holiness reached hitherto unimaginable heights and occasioned a brief period of negative media scrutiny (Adams 1972; Scotland 1997, 2000; Shuff 2005; Wilson 1967, 1990, 2000). Among other innovations introduced by Taylor were those of “separate tables” whereby members could not eat with non-members or at the same table as members under discipline; a ban on university attendance; and even pet ownership. It was during Taylor’s leadership that an estimated eight thousand members left the movement and many of these now feature among the outspoken critics of the group (Field 1996, 1998; Hales 2005; Scotland 1997, 2000; Thomas 2011; Wood 1976).

### The “Brethren Controversy”

In September 2005 media reports began to filter across from New Zealand into Australian newspapers about how members of this traditionally non-voting Christian sect had been discovered funding political pamphlets attacking the New Zealand Greens and supporting conservative National Party leader Dr. Don Brash (Higgins 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Maddox 2005b; Totaro 2005). In a campaign which the National Party had fought largely on the issue of tax-cuts for the wealthy the revelations of the third-party involvement of the Exclusive Brethren severely compromised Brash’s hitherto relatively clean-skin political image.<sup>6</sup> This incident was labeled by New Zealand investigative journalist Nicky Hagar in his 2006 expose book *The Hollowmen: A Study in the Politics of Deception* as “the biggest controversy of the Election” (2006, 30). This controversy, and Hagar’s book a year later, cost Brash his party leadership and precipitated a series of media facilitated panics over the alleged misdeeds of the Exclusive Brethren on both sides of the Tasman.

While as early as September 2005 the involvement of the Brethren in Australian political campaigns on behalf of incumbent Prime Minister John

5. The details of this often complex teaching are spelled out in J.N. Darby’s *Separation from Evil God’s Principle of Unity* first published in 1834.

6. It should also be noted, however, that earlier Brash had exploited racial tensions between Maori and Pākehā, Christian concerns about same-sex unions, and argued for stronger diplomatic ties with the Bush administration in the US and a relaxation of New Zealand’s nuclear bans (Hager 2006). Both these latter issues were important to the Brethren as demonstrated below.

Howard had been reported in broadsheet newspapers, this was barely deemed newsworthy at the time (Doherty 2005). However, concurrent with these early reports, Australian Greens Party Senator Bob Brown began what was to become a tit-for-tat war of words with fellow Tasmanian and Liberal Party Senator (and then Special Minister of State) Eric Abetz about the involvement of the Exclusive Brethren in what Brown labeled both a “shadowy” and “international” conspiracy “to have right-wing governments elected” (Australia, Senate, *Debates* 2005, 27, 42). It was from these first verbal exchanges between inveterate political rivals that emerged what “moral panic” theorist Stanley Cohen called an “inventory of images” (2002 [1970], 16–34), a collection of sinister symbols and emotive qualifiers surrounding discussion of the Exclusive Brethren, which were to become a mainstay of political and public discourse about the Brethren over the next two years and which I call here the “Brethren Controversy.”

Throughout 2005 this initial spark of controversy remained, for the most part, a smoldering ember in the Australian media, always present, but not quite reaching the temperature of newspaper concern. This all began to change in March 2006 when Brethren members were once again discovered behind anti-Greens political pamphleteering, this time during the Tasmanian State election. This incident also featured the added lurid detail of Brethren members being photographed driving a truck emblazoned with anti-Greens slogans around whilst concealing their identities with sinister pig-masks (ABC 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d; Denholm 2006a, 2006b). The Greens, both state and federal, responded furiously in what one Tasmanian editorial described as “another example of the now weary tactic of adding a few more dark forces, such as the tiny, marginal religious group, the Exclusive Brethren, to the Greens pantheon of demons” (Anon. 2006a, 16).

Tasmanian Greens leader Peggy Putt fumed about what she described as “the negative fear and smear campaign that was run against us from so many quarters,” naming the Brethren along with the logging companies and big business as the chief perpetrators (Denholm 2006b, 8). Similarly, in a series of outbursts and press releases federal Greens leader Senator Bob Brown fulminated against the Brethren, holding them chiefly responsible for the party’s lackluster performance in its traditional heartland and again dressing his rhetoric with a series of negative qualifiers chosen to demonize the Brethren (2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2006e, 2006f). One editorial neatly summarized Brown’s claims: “Brown believes the Exclusive Brethren is a shadowy, secretive, bigoted sect which instead of being pro-family has broken up families and caused suicides” (Anon. 2006b, 26).

From March 2006 until the end of August Brown made a series of press releases which attacked the Exclusive Brethren as a “cowardly” sect who “broke up families” and made further calls for official investigations into their political involvement, not only in the Tasmanian state election but also in the 2004 federal election campaign in then Prime Minister John Howard’s blue-ribbon Liberal Party seat of Bennelong in the north of Sydney, in what Brown openly referred to as “payback” (Brown 2006a, 2006b, 2006c).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a significant amount of Senate time over the winter parliament session of June 2006 was taken up by pugilistic debates about the Brethren between Brown and Abetz, who compared Brown’s vendetta against the Brethren to the Nazi persecution of Jews (Marr 2006).

What followed was eighteen months of media revelations about this retiring religious group. What had started as a few discreet stories had the snow-ball effect of bringing forward a small,<sup>8</sup> but vocal, group of ex-members who told stories of a group which had allegedly encouraged family separation (Bachelard 2006a), covered-up child abuse (Bachelard 2006b), laundered money (Grattan and Bachelard 2006), brainwashed children (Denholm 2006c), deprived members of all outside influences or worldly pleasures

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7. It was later revealed by David Marr (2006) and confirmed by footage aired on the *Four Corners* documentary “The Brethren Express” that members of the Brethren had publicly heckled Greens candidate and intelligence whistle-blower Andrew Wilkie during a 2004 appearance at the Gladesville RSL in northern Sydney (Belshaw 2007). The overall 2004 federal campaign was unsuccessful for the Greens and Senator Brown clearly held the Brethren (and Christian party Family First) partially responsible for this (Manning and Rootes 2005; Turnbull and Vromen 2004).

8. Contrary to image portrayed by the media the pool of former Brethren who have been key sources of information for journalists only numbers around six individuals, at least one of whom left as long ago as 1968 at the height of Taylor’s extreme reforms (Shuff 2005). These include Ngaire Thomas, who left in 1974; Joy Nason, who left in 1968; Warren McAlpin, who was expelled in the late 1980s; Ron Fawkes, who was excommunicated in 1984; Selwyn Wallace, who was “withdrawn from” in 1992. One of most recent Australian ex-member cited left in 2003 and at the time of the “Brethren Controversy” was engaged in a very bitter custody battle with his ex-wife who remained in the Exclusive Brethren. This case became a *cause célèbre* for journalists, in particular Michael Bachelard. However, on appeal, the court ruled in favor of the Brethren ex-wife on, among other grounds, the father’s antipathy toward the Brethren, Brown J writing: “he cannot separate that grief from anger at the institutions and beliefs which he sees as responsible for cutting him out of their lives and the lives of his other children and grandchildren. Despite his rhetoric, it was difficult for him not to see the case, at least in part, as a duel between law and religion, which it is not.” (*Peter and Elspeth* [2009] FamCA 551). On the earlier rulings in this case see Bachelard (2008), for the final appeal ruling with a detailed commentary and discussion see Thornthwaite (2011).

(Tchappatt 2009),<sup>9</sup> and even driven ex-members to suicide (Bachelard 2008; Belshaw 2006). The most damning of all accusations, however, was that Brethren members had spent large amounts of money on political lobbying in support of conservative political causes in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, expressly extolling the 2003 Iraq invasion, neoliberal economics, traditional family values, and the funding of private schools; whilst attacking same-sex unions and pro-union industrial relations legislation (Bachelard 2010; Belshaw 2007; Coultan 2006).

In the political climate of John Howard's final term in office between 2004 and 2007 an array of issues like industrial relations, same-sex unions, political party funding, and the preservation of Howard's woefully anachronistic image of an Australia unified under traditional (that is, white, Christian, and heterosexual) family values, were all firmly on the political agenda (Garra 2004; Johnson 2007; Maddox 2005a; Mutch 2004; Young and Tham 2006; Warhurst 2007). At the same time, this term of office had seen what was touted by many at the time as the rise of an Australian "Christian Right,"<sup>10</sup> with both overt and covert Christian influences taking their most public role in Australian politics since the Labor Party split of the 1950s, and the use of Christian-tinged rhetoric in parliamentary debates reaching hitherto unseen levels (Connell 2005; Crabb 2009; Lohrey 2006; Maddox 2005a; Mutch 2004; Smith 2009; Warhurst 2007).

One result of all these issues was an increased antipathy toward the Howard Coalition government, particularly in progressive circles, perhaps best exemplified by the populist third-party 2004 *Not Happy John!* and 2007 *Still Not Happy John!* campaigns and the on-going liberal *Get Up!* campaigns (Kingston 2005). As Howard's popularity waned so did that of the Exclusive Brethren and their staunch conservatism, anti-gay, anti-union, pro-traditional family values, pro-small business stances and secretive lobbying became potent symbols for rallying left-wing and liberal Howard critics. To again invoke the language of "moral panic" theorist Stanley Cohen the Brethren became an extremely potent and rhetorically useful Australian "folk devil" for Australian progressives, an image as equally potent as those of Muslim-Australians and asylum-seeker folk-devils so frequently invoked by Australian conservatives

9. David Tchappatt's book *Breakout: How I Escaped from the Exclusive Brethren* received extensive media coverage later in 2009 after Tchappatt appeared as a favorite contestant on Channel Ten's reality television program *Big Brother*.

10. In many ways this proved to be a false panic, as demonstrated by Smith (2009), however, Mutch (2004) is correct in noting that it put religion back on the agenda in Australian politics in a way which it had not been for decades.



during the same period (Al-Natour 2010; Cohen 2002 [1972]; Kabir 2006; Poynting et al. 2001).

A good measure of this process can be found in the editorials of major broadsheets. Feminists and critics of religion like Leslie Cannold decried the Brethren for their alleged denigration of women (Cannold 2006); whilst the *Australian's* mild-mannered atheist columnist Philip Adams attacked them as “that thoroughly unpleasant cult” (2007). Even academics generally well-disposed toward religion like Marion Maddox (2005a, 2005b) and Amanda Lohrey (2006) engaged in what Jenkins styled “conspiracy politics” (Jenkins 1991, 29), painting the Exclusive Brethren as potentially the most demonic incarnation of the rise of an American-Style “Christian Right” who were attempting to subvert Australian politics in a manner similar (and sometimes even connected to) the infamous *Family* in the US (Warhurst 2007; Sharlett 2007; Smith 2009).

The Australian public was increasingly sensitized to an image of the Brethren as a sinister force behind Australian conservative politics, and the historically very familiar counter-subversive imagery traditionally associated with anti-Catholicism became increasingly common.<sup>11</sup> This was perhaps best exemplified by journalist Michael Bachelard’s description of a Brethren meeting: “more the stuff of a mystery novel than organized religion. Nocturnal meetings, guards lurking in the shadows to repel intruders, faceless leaders—this is the twilight world of the Exclusive Brethren, which certainly takes the first word of its name as gospel” (Bachelard 2006a).<sup>12</sup>

Both television and print journalists were quick to enter the fray and act not only in disseminating this sinister image but with its discursive formation. Michael Bachelard of the traditionally left-wing Melbourne newspaper the *Age* took the lead and became a key moral entrepreneur,<sup>13</sup> publishing numerous articles (and eventually a book) exposing all manner of Brethren

11. Australia has a history of anti-Catholic rhetoric surrounding political issues dating back to settlement which has at times exploded over into inter-communal violence. For a discussion of the nature of anti-Catholic rhetoric and some of its manifestations in a US context see Jenkins (2003). For its historical manifestations in Australia (see Hogan 1987; O’Farrell 2009).

12. A great deal has been written about counter-subversion mythologies, for instance, Bromley (1991); Davis (1960); Hofstadter (1964); Jenkins (2003); Rogin (1986). To the best of my knowledge this material has not been explored in an Australian context.

13. Bachelard later became involved with the Australian Cult Watch group *Cult Information and Family Support* (CIFS) and was a keynote speaker at their 2011 conference where he gave a newspaper entitled “Reporting on Cults: Rewards and Punishments” (2011). Since publishing his book *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* he has frequently been a guest on tabloid television programs as a “cult expert,” though many aspects of the book are now outdated.



dirty laundry: from stories alleging child abuse (2006b), family break-ups (2006b), and money laundering (2006c), to stories claiming special legal exemptions and favorable treatment (2006d).<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Quentin McDermott, a journalist with public broadcaster the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (ABC) aired two explosive documentaries on the award-winning *Four Corners* program, one of which “The Brethren Express” (*Four Corners*, 15 October 2007) first aired a day after Howard’s called the November 24 2007 election date and blew the lid on Brethren political involvement and on the lengths Brethren members had gone to hide their identity. This is not to mention the numerous stories on tabloid television: commercial high-rating current affairs programs like *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair* played stories with revealing titles like “Brethren Bullies” (*Today Tonight*, 25 October 2007) and “Exclusive Brethren Power brokers revealed” (*A Current Affair*, 25 October 2007) throughout the 2007 election campaign; though these programs largely rehashed revelations which had already been in the public domain since David Marr’s important July 2006 article “Hidden Prophets” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 July 2006).

Not to be outdone by the media, politicians across the progressive political spectrum joined in a chorus of denunciation, with Senator Bob Brown continuing to refer to the Brethren alternatively as an “extreme right wing sect” (2006b), and “shadowy bigoted sect which harms families” (2006a), whilst continuing to refer to their political involvement as an “international conspiracy” (2005). Similarly, soon-to-be Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who was seeking to appeal to the more moderate voices of Christian politics,<sup>15</sup> labeled them an “extremist sect and cult,” a phrase which was to become one of the most repeated sound-bites of the 2007 electoral campaign and served to strategically distance his Christian faith from growing concerns about the power of the “Christian Right” (Adams 2007; Coorey 2007; Smith 2009). While Labor MP Anthony Albanese was even more explicit,

14. The industrial relations exemptions Bachelard and others criticize had been in place for over fifty years on the grounds of “conscientious objection” and applied equally to other groups like the Seventh-day Adventists; these have since been repealed (NSWADB 1984; Schubert 2009). Similarly the much criticized funding of Brethren schools merely carries on a long (if controversial) tradition of the funding of religious schools in Australia (Hogan 1987; NSWADB 1984). While the Brethren certainly took advantage of loopholes in these funding arrangements nothing they did was illegal and indeed Kevin Rudd even increased funding to Brethren schools under his “education revolution” (Rood 2008; Topsfield 2010).

15. Rudd, a self-proclaimed “Christian Socialist,” outlined his alternative view in his much maligned “Faith in Politics” essay in current affairs magazine *The Bulletin* (2006).

telling the media: “Make no mistake—the tentacles of this shadowy ultra-right-wing sect spread right up to the Prime Minister (“Tell all on Brethren: Labor.” *The Age*, October 23 2007).

While the “Brethren Controversy” has extended in a somewhat mitigated form into the present,<sup>16</sup> it suffices to say here that the “Brethren Controversy” must be viewed as a key contributing factor to Howard’s landslide defeat in the November 2007 Australian federal election and that almost all the reasons for the Brethren’s rise to prominence are reflective of the social and political milieu described above.

Aside from helping bring down an increasingly unpopular political leader, the “Brethren Controversy” as suggested throughout the above description has many, if not all, the trappings of a traditional “moral panic.”<sup>17</sup> Through adopting a perspective from “moral panic” theorists it certainly provides a very interesting contemporary example of how various claims-makers and media outlets across a broad political and ideological spectrum went about transforming a minor story about a few relatively sizable third-party political donations into a widespread social problem about a sinister and threatening “cult next door.”<sup>18</sup> Sadly, however, aside from Bachelard’s commendable,

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16. This has occurred particularly with regard to ongoing tabloid television reports on Channel Nine program *A Current Affair* and Channel 7 program *Today Tonight* on the theme of the so-called Brethren expansion as a threat to small communities. See Williams (2011a, 2011b, 2012).

17. The bibliography on the topic of “moral panics” is immense for broad outlines with extensive bibliography see Cohen (2002 [1974]); Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2006 [1994]) and Thompson (1998).

18. Bachelard (2010) and others have made much of the amount of money (\$350,000 AUD) spent by the Brethren on printing pamphlets and taking out newspaper ads and the apparent lengths these individuals went to conceal their identities. However, this needs to be contextualized within the broader issue of Australian electoral funding (Young and Tham 2006). In this context even a cursory look at political donors during these campaigns on the *Australian Electoral Commission* (AEC) website reveal far more concerning entities like British American Tobacco and hundreds of other companies who pour money directly into the coffers of the major parties not to mention long running associated entities like Cormack Foundation (who contributed \$1.8 million AUD to the 2004 Liberal Party war chest) which function as fronts to funnel money to political parties whilst concealing the identity of individual donors and removing their legal obligation to disclose spending (Anon. 2004). While certainly somewhat underhanded, nothing the Brethren did was illegal or uncommon when compared with other contributions and groups. Indeed, the flyers and newspaper ads printed by members of the Exclusive Brethren pales in comparison. Moreover, both the Greens and Bachelard fail to note that donations to the Australian Greens from charities like the Wilderness Society also came in for criticism during the “Brethren Controversy” (McKinnon and Franklin 2007).

if not entirely satisfactory book, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren* (2008), little scholarly analysis has gone into this topic (Mutch 2007).

This article is the first instalment of a broader project on the “Brethren Controversy” undertaken by the author which seeks to demonstrate from a “social constructionist” perspective the conditions and precipitating factors which helped to construct and shape the depiction of the Exclusive Brethren as a social problem.<sup>19</sup> What follows below seeks to identify a number of opinions and concerns which have been attached to the Exclusive Brethren in recent years, with a focus not on the oft-quoted voices of the social elites discussed thus far but on the private citizens (and voters) who choose to enter the mediated public sphere of newspaper letter columns.

### **The problem of public opinion**

Without access to extensive survey or polling data, collected with a sufficient and specific set of carefully worded questions, it is often difficult to gauge public opinions about real or perceived social problems and often what data is available is selectively interpreted or downright falsified in order to manufacture a problem where one does not exist. This is a problem which has been especially felt with regard to the measuring and reporting of public opinions concerning the ever-controversial and polarizing topic of religion, where the reportage of statistics is often heavily skewed toward negative findings.<sup>20</sup>

Given these problems it can be said with a fair degree of confidence that of all the categories of religion public opinion on minority religious groups like sects, NRMs or “cults” are probably the least measured and almost certainly the worst reported (e.g. Beckford 1999; McCloud 2007; Wright 1997).<sup>21</sup> Despite this dearth of reliable or even impressionistic data minority religious groups have very often become the subject of clearly disproportionate societal responses ranging from widespread community concern or fear, to escalated media coverage

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19. The bibliography on the topic of “social constructionism” is immense, see, for instance Best (1990; 1995); Jenkins (1992; 1998; 2000); Kituse and Spector (1987 [1977]).

20. On these common problems and numerous examples see Best (2004). On the specific issue of religion statistics see Stark (2008) and Wright (2010). A very good example of this can be found by looking at the statistics surrounding “pedophile priests” (Jenkins 2000b, 80–83).

21. As mentioned above in what follows I will adopt the term “sect” for the Exclusive Brethren in the technical sense discussed by Wilson (1970) and Stark and Bainbridge (1987). While the discussion surrounding NRMs and “cults” have often included the Exclusive Brethren their almost two hundred year history in Australia make the term NRM problematic (Beckford 1985). The term “cult” again is problematic and following Jenkins will only be used here when used subjectively or with the broad meaning of “unpopular religious group” (2000, 18).

and social control measures (e.g. Beit-Hallahmi 1991; Possamai and Lee 2004).

The reasons for such disproportionate responses are numerous; first, minority religious groups are very unlikely to warrant the kinds of quantification which interests pollsters except in the case of controversies (e.g. Gallup 1978, 1982, 1987, 1994).<sup>22</sup> Second, the few polls conducted regarding minority religious groups are very likely to be negatively skewed.<sup>23</sup> Third, due to their small size and in some cases separationist teachings public knowledge about or awareness of minority religious groups is generally very low and periodically tends to be subject to a substantial degree of misinformation by various claims-makers or interest groups (Barker 2001).

Unfortunately in past scholarship there has been a tendency to separate public reaction and public opinion often dismissing the importance of the latter, which has resulted in a marked neglect of public opinion (e.g. Beckford 1982, 1985; Bromley and Shupe 1989; Zaidman-Dvir and Sharot 1992). In most cases, public officials or *bona fide* experts (i.e. those with sufficiently recognized social capital or ownership of a problem) are quoted *ad nauseam*, whilst the voices of private citizens can only be heard through mediated forms of public debate or through the aggregate results of dubious news polls. To paraphrase the famous words of the labour historian E.P. Thompson (1963), the opinions of the everyman about minority religious groups have suffered from something akin to “a great condescension of contemporaneity.” While some pioneering work has been undertaken in this regard over the past decades, most studies have been understandably limited in terms of geography and/or time and are now extremely dated (Beit-Hallahmi 1991; Bromley and Breschel 1992; Richardson 1992; Richardson and van Driel 1984).

Given scholarly limitations of funding and time one potentially useful means for analyzing aspects of public opinion is by using basic content analysis to quantify themes and opinions in readers’ letters to newspapers (Richardson 2008). An extensive and very useful body of scholarship already exists which has utilized content analysis of newspaper articles concerning NRMs

22. A good recent example of this is the 2007 Pew Research Poll on public opinions and knowledge regarding Islam and Mormonism which arose directly out of Mitt Romney’s first bid for the Republican presidential ticket and the ongoing American concerns regarding Islamist terrorism (Pew Research Center 2007).

23. Such polls as are conducted are often extremely dubious television viewer news polls with poorly formulated questions and limited to yes/no answers. At best these kinds of news polls can only be viewed as a thermometer of the particular temperature of community response to NRMs for both a specific given moment and in specific social and geographic context (normally restricted to last sensationalist media report on the NRM in question and the viewer demographics of a given program).

and it is argued here that an analysis of readers' letters provides a useful unobtrusive and impressionistic means of measuring and analyzing aspects of public opinion (Perrin and Vaisey 2008; Richardson and van Driel 1988; Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2009; Crouch and Dampenhousse 1992).

While on its own the analysis of readers' letters can only be used to draw tentative conclusions about a broader population, in combination with other established research methods such as polling and surveys it provides an additional tool for measuring public opinion and is particularly useful for analyzing the qualitative aspects of public opinion for which these more traditional research methods are less suited (Perrin and Vaisey 2008). What follows below is a look at how readers' letters can be used as a useful, if blurred, window into the content of public opinions and debates by charting some of the attitudes expressed by the wider population and their concerns during the height of the "Brethren Controversy."

### Letters to the editor

In order to see how readers' letters can become a useful body of data for elucidating aspects of broader public opinion we must also recognize at the outset some of their limitations. In the past scholars have utilized readers' letters as a means of measuring popular opinion during political campaigns or periods of controversy and have arrived at the overwhelming consensus that readers' letters offer, at best, "a hazy reflection of public opinion" (Brown and Grey 1970, 450). Due to this traditional academic link to the study of political discourse, the study of readers' letters has been closely intertwined with the ways and means by which the public contribute to the democratic process and the preconditions for contributing to such debates in the letters column (Bromley 1998; Hall et al. 1978; Richardson and Franklin 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). As such, scholars have been particularly wary about the role of specific editorial filtering practices and the limited demographic composition of letter writers and some of these findings are worth briefly discussing here (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001, 2002; Richardson 2008; Richardson and Franklin 2004).

The consensus about editorial practice which has held sway since the 1970s has been that editors play a near Machiavellian role in determining which readers' letters are published.<sup>24</sup> More recently this position, while not completely rejected, has been tempered by studies which specifically address ques-

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24. This assertion is summarized by Grey and Brown (1970, 453) in their study of political letters during the 1968 US Presidential election as: "[an] unverifiable suspicion lingers that whatever feeling was discernable in print reflected less that of the community, or possibly even the majority of letter writers, than that of the editor."

tions of editorial policy. These studies have cautiously indicated the more positive role played by editors, who while not ideal, do at least aim at some sense of balance and proportional representation in their letters column (Bromley 1998; Wahl-Jorgensen 2001; 2002).

In terms of the study of social problems, the letters' column offers a unique barometer for measuring which elements of various claims-makers' "inventory of images" about a social problem have struck a chord with wider public opinion and become normative opinions in public discourse (Cohen 2002 [1972]:18; Hall et al. 1978; Thompson 1998; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2006 [1994]). For scholars, then, they provide a frosty but still useful window into public concerns from a group of the general population sufficiently sensitized and engaged with an issue to write to their local newspaper. Before moving on to the content analysis it is important to briefly discuss some of the editorial filters which have been utilized by journalists, noting some probable examples of their use among the letters discussed below.

### Editorial criteria

While discussions are ongoing, the set of four criteria or rules proposed by Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) have already proved a useful starting point for understanding editorial policy and will be quickly surveyed here (Perrin and Vaisey 2008; Richardson 2008). The first rule is (1) the rule of relevance: for a letter to be printed it must deal specifically with something which is considered by the broader public, and the media in particular, as newsworthy. As such these letters normally "take the form of a response to items already placed firmly on the agenda by the newspaper—news items that are 'relevant' 'timely' of 'general interest'" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002, 73). Our current context of letters concerning the Exclusive Brethren became relevant in the context of the social and political anxieties of the late Howard years described above.

This rule of relevance, far from being an impediment for scholars, is actually quite helpful. By examining chronological spread of these letters we can identify specific triggering events and stories which contributed to stirring the "Brethren Controversy."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, this rule of relevance helps to assure that readers' letters are responses to certain stimuli rather than a wild tangent about a general topic of concern.

The second criterion is (2) the rule of entertainment: letters are less likely to be printed if they are boring and uncontroversial and typically editors prefer

25. A similar approach has been adopted by Crouch and Dampenhousse (1992, 7f.) to how the numbers of articles followed identifiable periodic spikes which could be connected with certain identifiable cases or events.

letters with a little panache or a whiff of scandal. A large number of the letters to all three newspapers analyzed below seem to have been selected on the basis of their caustic humor and an almost universally combative stance.<sup>26</sup> We see a number of good examples of this editorial practice in letters related to the 2007 scandal surrounding revelations that Australian prime-ministerial contender Kevin Rudd's had visited to a Manhattan strip-club which make comments like:

Rudd visited a nightclub and Howard was visited by the Exclusive Brethren.  
Who do you think had the most fun? (*The Age*, 25 August 2007).

In an Australian context understanding the rule of entertainment with regard to readers' letters regarding the Exclusive Brethren is particularly important given the Australian propensity for irreligious forms of humor. Here poking fun at the Brethren, while somewhat negative, need not be taken as an indicator of hostility (Bouma 2006).<sup>27</sup>

The third criterion is (3) the rule of brevity: this rule holds that shorter, punchier letters are usually preferable to long-winded and carefully argued pieces. This rule, as we will see below is well exemplified by the frequent inclusion of pithy quotes or one-liners. A number of the letters examined are single rhetorical sentences like: "The Exclusive Brethren is to become more inclusive, at least for unions" (*The Age*, 21 March 2009) or "Those Exclusive Brethren advertisements have left the brethren green with envy rather than flushed with righteousness" (*The Age*, 27 November 2006).

Finally, the fourth criterion is (4) the rule of authority: this rule deals with the privileging of certain letters by recognized authorities or interest groups. As a general rule though, editors tend to prefer experience over expertise. A good example of this is the number of the letters which recount stories or

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26. For the same reasons, it can also be assumed that letters dealing with a political or religious scandal and/or amusing political anecdotes, rather than a policy, are far more likely to be published for entertainment or to sup wider public prurience (Bromley 1998; Grey and Brown 1970).

27. Similarly, another quite cheeky letter tells an amusing anecdote relating how the reader "met a man the other day who said he had it on good authority that when Kevin Rudd was a two-year-old he took a chocolate biscuit from his Aunt Mary's coffee table without asking." (*The Age*, 13 March 2007). The rest of this very amusing letter reads:

While the Howard haters will no doubt go on, ad nauseam, about imaginary WMD, AWB kickbacks, children overboard, ministerial unaccountability, travel and printing rorts, abuse of the Senate, politicising the public service, close ties to the Exclusive Brethren, housing unaffordability, failure to invest in education, and misleading the public about interest rate rises and industrial relations changes, at least John Howard is old enough to buy his own biscuits.



anecdotes beginning with phrases like “I speak with first-hand knowledge as I escaped the Brethren’s clutches nearly 40 years ago” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 3, July 2006), or “As a second-generation descendent of Exclusive Brethren grandparents” (*The Age*, 23 September 2006). These examples are ample testimony to Wahl-Jorgensen’s broader argument that letters’ column newspapers seek to bring the lives of private citizens to the table rather than exclude these in favor of dry and reasoned deliberation (2001).

This fourth rule can be further subdivided into overt and covert editorial practices. By overt, Wahl-Jorgensen refers to the practice of editors specifically excluding letters which disagrees with a specific ideological agenda expressed by an editor, the newspaper, or its owners (Bromley 1998; Chomsky and Hermann 1986; Hall et al. 1978). Of course without access to the entire number of letters received it is only possible to make tendentious conclusions about the overt use of this rule, and no systematic ideological examination akin to that of Hall and his colleagues is undertaken here (1978). This said, there does seem to be a sufficient balance between uniformity and diversity of opinion to excuse the newspaper editors from accusations of heavily pushing a particular position to the exclusion of another; at least among the letters. Indeed, in a number of letters spokesmen for the Exclusive Brethren, and both hostile and neutral politicians involved in the wider “Brethren Controversy,” were all been given some right of reply to criticisms or to correct factual errors; though as we will see in the case of Brethren members these were met with considerable derision.

The covert aspect of the rule of authority is premised on the idea that selection of letters published should meet a set of often un-written but assumed criteria for participation in public discourse, that is, letters need correct “spelling, grammar, and persuasiveness [and] one needs to be well versed in hegemonic standards of expression, but also knowledgeable on the topic under discussion.” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002, 77). All three newspapers surveyed below are in many ways more explicit than covert in this, for instance, the *Age* gives specific set of criteria by which it assesses letters.<sup>28</sup>

While none of these criteria are mutually exclusive, nor does the failure to meet one or more of the criteria necessarily automatically exclude a letter, they do provide us with some understanding of why certain letters have been

28. This criterion reads: “We prefer letters of no more than 200 words and they must indicate your full name, address (not a post office box) and a daytime telephone number for verification. By submitting your letter to us for publication you agree that we may edit the letter for legal, space or other reasons and may, after publication in the newspaper, republish it on the internet or in other media.”

included and give us some understanding of what kind of letters may have been excluded. Similarly, while these criteria by no means exhaust the potential influences editorial decisions can have, they do alert us to some of the things to be considered when examining the content of letters which have gone to print and in understanding the underlying “media values” and the traditional *topoi* which these reflect.<sup>29</sup> Important in the current context, we must also remember that often the most negative or pugilistic letters will be excluded for fear of libel against the newspaper and so too will the letters of questionable sanity which are regularly received by newspapers (Richardson 2008).

Having surveyed these editorial criteria we are able to draw a number of working conclusions about the utility of readers’ letters as gauges of public opinion. On the negative side we must acknowledge that we cannot make general inferences from the quantity or demographic make-up of readers’ letters to the general population. As we will see below, letters are by no means a random sample comparable to well conducted polling data or surveys; indeed, in some cases they may not even be a representative sample of a newspaper’s readers let alone broader social trends.<sup>30</sup> While it is somewhat clichéd, the traditional view that most readers’ letters are from white, middle-aged, educated men should be kept in mind (Bromley 1998; Grey and Brown 1970; Richardson 2008; Richardson and Franklin 2004).

On the positive side, providing we acknowledge the limitations, letters allow us an articulate and unique, if unconventional, way to measure some of the opinions which are being expressed by those private citizens concerned enough about a given issue to write to their local newspaper and cast their hat into the ring of public debate. As such readers’ letters provide an unobtrusive, less costly and (sometimes) less labor intensive body of data which adds to, and compliments, the traditional research methods of surveys, polling and participant observation (Perrin and Vaisey 2008).

What follows below seeks to demonstrate that by analyzing readers’ letters on the topic of the Exclusive Brethren (and by implication other NRMs) scholars can identify key aspects of (1) the events or undertakings which had the most impact on public perceptions of the Exclusive Brethren and (2) which specific articles and issues struck a responsive chord with readers. As such they offer a glimpse into the workings of what Hall and his col-

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29. By “media values” I refer to Hoover’s (1998, 11) broad definition as: “The way the media handle religion is deeply embedded in a set of historical, cultural, and political perceptions about religion’s natural, proper, or desirable place in democratic public life.”

On the issue of key *topoi* see the discussion in Silk (1997).

30. In some cases they may even be deliberate forgeries as in the case of Fowler et al. (2009).

leagues called the “spiral of signification” whereby the interaction between the reporting of a perceived social problem and the public reaction to this reporting help to reinforce the significance and perceived importance of a given social problem and to identify which “media values” or *topoi* are being invoked in the public discourse about a perceived social problem (Hall et. al 1978; Thompson 1998).<sup>31</sup>

### Method

What follows are the initial results from a wider project entailing a multifaceted content analysis of media coverage concerning the Exclusive Brethren in the Australian media with a particular emphasis on elite broadsheet newspapers. For this part of the project a database of readers’ letters which mentioned the Exclusive Brethren sect was assembled. This database was drawn from the three most widely circulated Australian broadsheet newspapers, the *Australian*, the *Age*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* from the period between 2000 and 2010.<sup>32</sup> All these letters were written, as the rule of relevance predicts, in response to articles published in these same newspapers and before progressing too far it is necessary to discuss some aspects of this coverage and the reasons for adopting these particular newspapers.

While studies which deal with media reporting on NRMs or “cults” have traditionally argued that stories are more likely to appear (often serialized) in smaller local newspapers (Bromley and Shupe 1980; Crouch and Damphousse 1992; Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2009; Richardson and van Driel 1988; Rowe and Cavender 1991), the broader aims of this project have focused instead on the most widely distributed elite broadsheet newspapers for a number of reasons.

First, newspapers with wider circulation, both in terms of readership num-

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31. Hall et al. (1978, 62) give a good explanation of this process writing:

This transformation into a public idiom thus gives the item an external public reference and validity in images and connotations already sedimented in the stock of knowledge which the newspaper and its public share. The importance of this external public reference point is that it serves to objectify a public issue. That is, the publicizing of an issue in the media can give it a more “objective” status as a real (valid) issue of public concern than would be the case had it remained as merely a report made by experts and specialists. Concentrated media attention confers the status of high public concern on issues which are highlighted; these generally become understood by everyone as the “pressing issues of the day.” This is part of the media’s agenda-setting function. Setting agendas also has a reality confirming effect.

32. The daily circulation of the newspapers at the mid-point of the period (2006) covered was *The Age* 201,000; *Sydney Morning Herald* 212,078; *The Australian* 131,538.

bers and geographical diffusion, have greater potential to influence readers' opinions and to a limited extent the readers' letters to such newspapers will be, at least in theory, more reflective of a broader snapshot of the population. Second, the broader geographic circulation of these three newspapers allowed for some examinations of whether a correlation exists between geographic location and attitudes toward the Exclusive Brethren.<sup>33</sup> The third reason for selecting the major broadsheets relates to Australian media ownership, which perhaps more than any other country in the world has been dominated by a very small and influential number of oligarchs since at least the early 1980s (Denemark 2005; Windschuttle 1984).

Because of this restricted ownership each newspaper has traditionally been seen as representing a different ideological persuasion; much as Hall and his colleagues found with regard to British newspapers (1978). As such, the newspapers selected were the traditionally conservative national newspaper the *Australian* owned by Rupert Murdoch's *New Limited* and the only nationally circulating broadsheet, the more centrist *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the traditionally more left-wing or liberal leaning Melbourne newspaper the *Age*, both owned by *Fairfax Media*. Finally the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* are traditionally seen as the more respectable daily newspapers in the two largest Australian cities of Sydney and Melbourne (as compared with the often muck-raking *Daily Telegraph* and *Sun-Herald*) read amongst the so-called white-collar middle-class; those who in the past have been found to be most likely to express concern over alternative religions (Richardson and van Driel 1988; Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy 2009). It should be noted here, if only in passing, that other small newspapers were surveyed for material but only the *Hobart Mercury* contained a substantial body of letters dealing with the Brethren (many of which were far more positive than those analyzed here).

The data was assembled from readers' letters using a database search on *Factiva* using the key terms "Exclusive Brethren." The total number of letters from between 2000 and 2010 was 109 comprised of 63.4% ( $N=69$ ) from the *Age*, 17.4% ( $N=19$ ) from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and 19.2 % ( $N=21$ ) from the *Australian*. The number of letters, as demonstrated by the graphs in Appendix 1, was particularly high over three spike periods during 2006 and 2007 which corresponds to similar spikes in the number of articles published during the same periods. This distribution pattern of letters can be seen more clearly when a monthly distribution of articles and letters are compared, see

33. No correlation was found here despite the distinctive "Brethren Geography" discussed by Tonts (2001). See Appendix 4.

Appendix 2, between 2006 and 2007 and will be discussed in detail below.

The letters included ranged in length from between one sentence to half an A4 page and it is worth noting that around 30.5% ( $N=21$ ) of the *Age's* substantially larger percentage of letters were taken from their *And another thing* feedback section which is comprised of a sample of pithy quotes and witty one-liners. Each letter was coded according to its genre (argumentative, anecdote/observation, jokes, request, thank you, and apology) following the criteria proposed by Richardson (2008). Second, each letter was coded for date, gender and location of the writer, and any information revealed about a letter writer's profession or links to the Exclusive Brethren. Third, following the method adopted by Perrin and Vaisey each letter was inductively coded for the topics and sub-topics contained in each article including broad categories like politics, family, media coverage, and more specific subthemes like religious tolerance, media attacks, voting, ex-member testimony, links to Howard, hypocrisy (2008).<sup>34</sup>

Finally following the approach adopted by Richardson and van Driel (1988), and utilized successfully by Crouch and Damphousse (1992) and Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy (2009), the articles were coded for the tone of response on a Likert scale with five values: extremely positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, and extremely negative. These follow van Driel and Richardson, with some context specific modifications (1988).

The categories were defined as follows: "extremely positive" included any letter which defended or supported the Exclusive Brethren, rejected allegations made against them in the newspaper or other letters and showed no signs of suspicion or reservation about the group. Among letters which were not written by actual members of the Exclusive Brethren an example of such a letter was the following letter printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Exclusive Brethren living in Australia breathe the same air, use the same roads, eat the same food, use the same money and get sick and need doctors and hospitals like the rest of us. They are Australians and have as much right of access to elected leaders as anyone. Or is the ALP proposing a (religious) values test for entry into politicians' offices? (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August 2007)

"Somewhat positive" included any letter which defended or supported the Exclusive Brethren against allegations in articles or other letters, but made some caveats or expressed reservations about aspects of the Brethren's behav-

34. Coding reliability was established by 10% sample of letters and articles being re-coded by either Baylor University graduate student Nathan Reynolds or University of New South Wales undergraduate student Nicky Michaelides; 100% agreement was found in terms of genre and tone. Significant differences between coders with regard to topics and subtopics led to the adoption of an inductive approach.

ior or practice. A good example of this was the following letter published in the *Australian* which partially reads:

For most of us, the beliefs and practices of this religion may not be quite our cup of tea, but it's a lawful organisation and we do claim to be a tolerant society espousing freedom of religion. And as far as I'm aware, members of the Exclusive Brethren aren't into such activities as suicide bombing, stoning people to death or female genital mutilation. Could it be that Rudd is guilty of a little selectivity in his religious denunciations? (*The Australian*, 27 August 2007)

"Neutral" indicated that a letter took no discernable position on the Exclusive Brethren. Unlike in the previous studies adopting this method, due to the nature of readers' letters as a genre, the numbers in this category were very small due to the generally argumentative nature of the letters. An example of one included here was a non-committal one-line comment like: "Given the Pope's recent faux pas, the Nationals receiving backing from the Exclusive Brethren could prove to be a poisoned chalice" (*The Age*, 20 September 2006).

"Somewhat negative" included letters which ridicule the Exclusive Brethren or treated them with suspicions and/or doubts without being overtly hostile. This category also included the rhetorical use of the term "Exclusive Brethren" as a negative symbol whilst addressing another issue (usually political intrigue). Examples of this category would include comments like:

The Howard Government benefited well from the support of the Exclusive Brethren in the 2004 federal election, thanks to their less-than-honest attack on the progressive parties like the Greens. Since then, Mr Howard has weakened the disclosure laws so that it's possible for an individual or group to donate \$90,000 to a political party without anyone knowing.

(*The Age*, 22 September 2006)

John Howard never misses a chance to harangue the Muslim population about what he perceives as their failure to adopt Australian values. Yet he has the breath-taking hypocrisy to support the Exclusive Brethren in their illegal refusal to vote. Furthermore, he asks us to respect a group which has engaged in an anonymous, underhanded smear campaign against one of our political parties, the Greens. The Prime Minister's values have no place in a decent Australian society.

(*The Australian*, 28 September 2006)

Finally, "extremely negative" included letters which are overtly hostile or attacking toward the Brethren, as well as those in which the terms "Exclusive Brethren" are accompanied by negative adjectives or qualifiers, and letters in which opponents of the Brethren were given sympathy and support. Most of these are letters of moral outrage from members of the public or ex-members

of the Brethren, for instance, the following letters published in the *Age* which (in part) read:

My blood boils when I read of the atrocities committed against the children of the Exclusive Brethren. (*The Age*, 1 January 2007)

It is about time, instead of defending it with lies and blaming the victims, the Brethren acknowledge their culpability in splitting up families and that this behavior is unacceptable to the community. (*The Age*, 30 December 2006)

Also included among these letters are those letters which not only attack politicians using the Brethren as a rhetorical tool but also combine these denunciations with the use of negative qualifiers and/or emotive rhetorical language when speaking of the Brethren. For instance, some letters refer to the Brethren as: “a *sinister hidden group behind the scenes and manipulating politics*,” (*The Age*, 22 September 2006 emphasis added) or “*the secretive, ultra-conservative Exclusive Brethren, whose tentacles are deeply entwined in the Liberal Party machine*,” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 September 2005 emphasis added) and finally:

Once again we have the Exclusive Brethren trying to influence the Government and now our Family Court. This *scatty sect* readily tries to split families that do not conform to their doctrine. And it is the same *fundamentalist sect* that John Howard and Peter Costello see no harm in talking to—which is the really frightening thing. (*The Age*, 27 December 2006 emphasis added)

Taken together this method of coding allows us to measure something of the tone of public debate (Perrin and Vaisey 2008), and the unique form of what Foucault famously called “discourse formation” which has taken place over the course of the “Brethren Controversy” (Foucault 1981; Thompson 1998).

## Results

Beginning with the tone of letters the aggregated results across all three newspapers were far more negative than has been the case in earlier studies of other NRMs in Australia.<sup>35</sup> The aggregate of negative letters (those in the “somewhat negative” and “extremely negative” categories) across all three newspapers comes in at an overwhelming 84% with all three individual newspapers recording an extremely high disproportion of negative material (Table 1.1): the *Age* coming in as the most negative with 85% (Table 1.2), the *Sydney*

35. This is particularly true when compared with the fairly recent book chapter by Possamai and Possamai-Inesedy (2009) and is most likely indicative of the success of media campaigns waged against both the Exclusive Brethren and Scientology (see Doherty 2012 [Forthcoming]).



Table 1. Letters about the Exclusive Brethren in Australian Broadsheets (2000-2010; 109 letters).

| 1                  | 2                 | 3       | 4                 | 5                  |
|--------------------|-------------------|---------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Extremely Positive | Somewhat Positive | Neutral | Somewhat Negative | Extremely Negative |
| 10 (9%)            | 5 (5%)            | 2 (2%)  | 37 (34%)          | 54 (50%)           |

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Genres.

| Genre                | <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> (N=19) | <i>The Australian</i> (N=21) | <i>The Age</i> (N=69) |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Argumentative        | 13 (68%)                            | 12 (57%)                     | 39 (56.5%)            |
| Anecdote/Observation | 5 (26.5%)                           | 7 (33%)                      | 23 (33%)              |
| Joke                 | 0                                   | 1 (5%)                       | 4 (6%)                |
| Request              | 1 (6.5%)                            | 0                            | 1 (1.5%)              |
| Thank You            | 0                                   | 0                            | 0                     |
| Apology              | 0                                   | 1 (5%)                       | 2 (3%)                |

*Morning Herald* the least negative with a still substantially high 78% (Table 1.3) and the *Australian* at 80% (Table 1. 4).<sup>36</sup> On average 81% of letters written to Australian broadsheet newspapers about the Exclusive Brethren were negative in tone.

While given the nature and topics of the newspaper coverage discussed above it is not surprising that most people were negative toward the Brethren, the reasons for this are not necessarily just an indicator of readers' overt hostility to the group. In a significant number of cases this is probably a matter of the genre of readers' letters generally which, as Grey and Brown noted forty years ago "most letters are 'agin' something or somebody" (1970, 453). This combative approach is born out when we look at the genre spread (Table 2.1), in which the majority of letters can be easily classified as argumentative in style.

The remaining percentage of letters is largely comprised of anecdotes/observations or jokes; not always directly aimed at the Brethren. For instance, one pithy letter reads: "there's a whiff of a deal with the devil about John Howard's meeting with the Exclusive Brethren. I just hope the Brethren brought their garlic." (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 January 2007). This specific genre factor

36. For Tables 1.2; 1.3; 1.4 see Appendix 3.

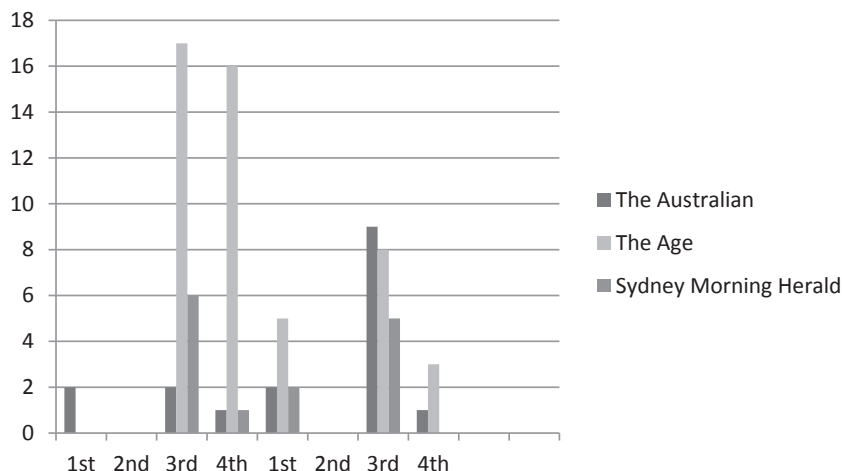


Figure 1. Aggregate of Negative Letters Quarterly (2006–2007).

also goes a long way to explaining the nearly complete absence (2%) of letters in the “neutral” category: newspapers are traditionally adverse to fence-sitters, who offer little in the way of entertainment values when compared to fiery controversialists.

As already alluded to above, if we look at the spread of aggregate negative letters quarterly over the period 2006 to 2007 we can see that a similar pattern appearing as that which occurs with the total number of letters and the total number of articles (Figure 1).<sup>37</sup>

The majority of negative letters were written during three spike periods. The first occurred during the third quarter of 2006 (particularly September), the period in which Michael Bachelard first began writing about the Exclusive Brethren and following the airing of *Four Corners* “Separate Lives” program on September 25. In October the coverage died down, only to elicit a second spike of attention toward the end of the fourth quarter 2006 and beginning of the first quarter 2007 (December-January). This second spike can be attributed to the media “Silly Season” where news is traditionally slow and thus puffer or filler stories are needed in order to make up the newspaper’s content, at this time Bachelard published a series of syndicated negative articles about the Brethren in both the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The third major spike occurred in the third quarter of 2007 and is far more interesting in terms of assessing which aspects of the “Brethren Controversy” struck-a-chord with the letter writing public immediately preceding the 2007

37. For these graphs see Appendixes 1 and 2.

federal election campaign. In order, then, to gauge why the Brethren were subject to so many negative letters during these three periods it is useful to look at each of these spike periods in isolation.

### Enter Bachelard and McDermott

Of the 21 letters written to the *Age* in response to the first set of Bachelard articles in September 2006 about nineteen of the letters were specifically related to political matters, in particular the revelations printed in the Bachelard articles like: "Religious sect backs Nationals in run-up to state poll" (*The Age*, 19 September 2006), Michelle Grattan's "PM met Brethren, defends their voice" (*The Age*, 27 September 2006), and "PM refuses to give details of sect talks" (*The Age*, 28 September 2006) and Mark Coultan's "Power wielded from the fringes" (*The Age*, 23 September 2006). Three themes, however, come to dominate: the Brethren refusal to vote, their secretive and anti-social nature, and the classic *topoi* of hypocrisy.

Of these, eight letters referred to the issue of the Brethren not voting, with readers asking pointed questions like "If God chooses the government, why does the Exclusive Brethren bother funding political campaigns?" (*The Age*, 21 September 2006), and "An anti-voting sect having more influence over elections than the voters? It's time for all state MPs to declare their dealings with the elusive Exclusive Brethren." Similarly letters express distaste at what one reader called a "secretive religious sect [and] a sinister hidden group behind the scenes manipulating politics" (*The Age*, 22 September 2006).

This image of the Brethren as a shadowy cabal of lobbyists struck-a-chord with a number of readers who asked rhetorical questions like "Why should the Exclusive Brethren get any special treatment? One questions the motives of any group that is secretive and non-transparent" (*The Age*, 22 September 2006). Others, of course, used far more sinister language, for instance the letter already quoted by a reader which referred to "the secretive, ultra-conservative Exclusive Brethren, whose tentacles are deeply entwined in the Liberal Party machine" (*The Australian*, 22 March 2006).

While this kind of negative rhetoric was common amongst readers we must here make the point that most of the negative qualifiers adopted in these letters were already part of the "inventory of images" which had been floating around in the media long before the broadsheets had begun coverage of the issue. It is worth repeating here that almost all the negative qualifiers had been adopted by Senator Bob Brown and his colleague Senator Christine Milne in both press releases and Senate debates throughout 2006 and received wide coverage on the public broadcaster the ABC; a channel often accused of a

distinct left-wing bias (ABC 2006e, 2006f, 2006g). The way in which these readers write about the Brethren draws on the political rhetoric of Brown and Milne, then, is a good example of the workings of the “spiral of signification,” with the elite voices and rhetoric of politicians filtering through the media into the discourse of the wider public.

Apart from voting and secrecy, a third theme which marked the letters during this period and many of the other political letters was one of the classical *topoi* of the “religion beat,” that of accusations or examples of hypocrisy; in this case directed against both the Brethren and their political supporters. Many readers made statements like: “Memo to Exclusive Brethren: I guess you won’t be reading this memo here, but anyhow the proper way to influence the coming Victorian election is via the system the rest of us use. Vote.” (*The Age*, 26 September 2006). Other readers, however, were far more concerned with John Howard’s hypocrisy in defending the Brethren than the group itself.

This antipathy, however, needs to be viewed in its particular media and political context. The September flurry of Brethren articles were published soon after public debate had arisen regarding Howard’s unfavorable attitude toward Muslim-Australians when he called for “full integration” on talk-back radio saying:<sup>38</sup>

Fully integrating means accepting Australian values, it means learning as rapidly as you can the English language, if you don’t already speak it, and it means understanding that in certain areas, such as the equality of men and women, the societies that some people have left were not as contemporary and as progressive as ours...People who come from societies where women are treated in an inferior fashion have got to learn very quickly that that is not the case in Australia.

(*Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 2006)

The perceived hypocrisy of this statement was immediately picked up by Senator Brown, who noted:

Just last month the Prime Minister blocked an inquiry into the Exclusive Brethren sect, which is misogynist and which represses women in a way which should simply not be allowed in Australian society... It’s un-Australian, but it’s fostered by the Prime Minister. (ABC 2006e)

When later in September Howard explicitly defended his Brethren double-standard the newspapers published articles like “PM met Brethren, defends their voice” (*The Age*, September 27 2006) and “PM refuses to give details of sect talks” (*The Age*, September 28 2006), and columnists were quick to point

38. While space does not permit a full account here this comment is representative of the Howard era reversal of the more open immigration policies and celebration of multiculturalism encouraged by both Liberal and Labor governments since the 1970s. On this see Johnson (2007); Maddox (2005a).

out the irony with editorial titles like “Must double standards be met, too?” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, September 30 2006), and comments like those from feminist columnist Adele Horin:

When the Government firms up the set of Australian values it wants migrants to endorse, it should keep this crowd in mind. The next minister to reiterate Brendan Nelson’s words to Muslims to “clear off” if they don’t accept and teach Australian values, should recall the teachings of the Exclusive Brethren.

(Horin 2006)

A number of letter writers jumped to negatively compare Howard’s uncharitable comments about Islam to his strident defence of what were deemed the equally extremist Exclusive Brethren and chastised Howard for what they viewed as his hypocritical attitude, as one Muslim Australian correspondent to the *Sydney Morning Herald* asked “I wonder what would Mr Howard say (sic.) if a Muslim group in Australia didn’t allow its members to vote. Would he respect its right to be different?” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September 2006). This recurrent theme is perhaps best exemplified in the following letter from the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

The group’s extreme and hateful political agenda is an affront to democracy. I’m guessing the reason Mr Howard doesn’t find this behaviour immoral or “un-Australian” is that it’s being perpetrated by well-heeled, middle-aged white men rather than by the usual scapegoats. (September 29 2006).

As with the broader media coverage this negative politics of association and hostility toward the Brethren seems to have come from all progressive quarters, each of which found common ground against various aspects of the Howard Coalition’s conservative agenda. A number of letters ask pointed questions similar to those raised by Horin and later by fellow feminist Leslie Cannold, for instance: “in this enlightened age of gender equality, openness, inclusiveness and interdependence, can a group calling itself the Exclusive Brethren have any credibility” (*The Australian*, 20 September 2006) and

Both the Treasurer and the Prime Minister have expressed concern about religious groups that diminish the rights of women. Does this concern extend to Christian sects such as the Exclusive Brethren (and others), in which women must be silent in meetings and have their heads covered? Or does this concern just apply to Muslims? (*The Age*, 25 September 2006)

Drawing specific attention to what was perceived as Brethren’s denigration of women, letter writers and columnists used the Brethren as a catch-all example of the kind of homogenous, Anglo-Saxon, Christian, socially conservative, 1950s idealism promoted by the Howard government to the exclu-

sion of the more multicultural values pushed by the earlier Fraser, Hawke and Keating governments (Johnson 2007; Maddox 2005a).

As we can see from just the September 2006 period, letter writers were responding to a set of broader “media values” and an established “inventory of images” and had been thoroughly sensitized by contemporary concerns and debates to show a degree of antipathy toward the Brethren. However, it is important to note that despite its overt hostility and emotive language, the overall picture of the readers’ letters demonstrate far less of a concern about the private behavior of the Brethren than what was considered their audacious trespass into federal politics and the Howard governments hypocritical nepotism in defending them. The Brethren became a proxy means to attack both the Coalition and their wider championing of socially conservative values which was irresistible to opponents across the progressive spectrum.

### Silly season 2006

The second spike in letters occurred over the Christmas-New Year period of 2006 to 2007. At this time Bachelard had published a series of articles (often syndicated and even front page) in both the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, using titles like: “Banish your father, sect leader tells girl” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 December 2006); “Sect asked for power to prevent child visits” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 December 2006); and “Brethren bid to hide sexual assaults” (*The Age*, 30 December 2006).

In this emotionally heightened and family-oriented period of year these articles naturally attracted a significant number of responses, and as the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s online content editor David Higgins noted at the time “Stories about sects rate almost as well as stories about sex” (“Sects and Lies,” 30 December 2006). Letter writers were not only reading these articles online, but writing in, as one ex-member of the Brethren wrote to the *Age*:

The day after Christmas was a most appropriate time to publish a further damning article on the Exclusive Brethren...This sect claims to uphold Christian values, but no sect member would have exchanged gifts, attended church services on December 25 to commemorate Christ’s birth or even have enjoyed traditional turkey with Christmas trimmings. It bans any association with Christmas celebrations, branding even Christmas church services as pagan.

(*The Age*, 27 December 2006)

While a number of negative letters were published at this time, this period also saw a series of Brethren responses, with a number of Brethren members writing to the *Age* to blast Bachelard’s coverage as a sham with one letter claiming “I wish to state that Michael Bachelard’s article on the Exclusive

Brethren is basically a lot of lies claims,” whilst another claimed the articles was “riddled with false and devious statements,” and noted that “Bachelard seems determined to take every opportunity to vilify the Brethren with no regard for the truth” (*The Age*, 28 December 2006). Despite these impassioned protestations these Brethren letters were met with a predictable response of other letter writers’ ridicule:

Considering the Exclusive Brethren are not allowed to read newspapers or communicate using computers etc, how did they manage to read Michael Bachelard’s article, let alone reply to *The Age* within two days?

(*The Age*, 29 December 2006)

What are all the naughty Exclusive Brethren... doing reading such a wicked, worldly journal as *The Age*? (*The Age*, 30 December 2006)

Despite the somewhat more personal nature of the letters during this period, the political themes did not go away and Howard’s hypocrisy was still continually brought to bear. One writer to the *Age* made the following all too familiar statement in response to Bachelard’s article “Brown demands sect inquiry” (27 December 2006):

Muslims and other migrant groups are continuously subjected to accusations that many among them do not choose to embrace the Australian way of life and culture—the definition of which the Howard Government and its bigoted supporters cannot clearly define. To make matters worse, they will be subjected to a citizenship test that reminds many of our shameful White Australia past.

On the other hand, the Exclusive Brethren won’t let its members read newspapers, watch TV, use computers, vote—and even openly states that “the lifestyle of Australians is inappropriate for bringing up children.”

One can only imagine Mr Howard’s reaction if the same words were uttered by a Muslim or other migrant group. (*The Age*, 29 December 2006)

Following this “Silly Season” outburst the controversy again went quiet, with the Brethren going to ground and hiring Tony McCorkell, as a media liaison (“Brothers duck and cover” *The Australian*, 20 February 2007). As with the previous period much of the content of these letters is more of a commentary on politics and the Howard government than the Brethren per se, however, with the heightened emotional atmosphere of the Christmas season readers seem to have been far readier to attack the image of the Brethren as anti-family.

### **The Australian Federal Election 2007**

Surprisingly most of the public ire devoted to the Brethren had been spent by the time the official election campaign came around, but while Howard only



officially announced the November poll date in October the period from December 2006 and Rudd's rise to the leadership of the ALP was *de facto* campaigning season; particularly when July had passed with no election date being set. The period of August 2007, then, saw the high-point of anti-Brethren articles and letters to the editor, particularly after an increasingly popular Kevin Rudd labeled them an "extremist cult" and joined the chorus of critical voices questioning the links between the group and the Howard government ("Exclusive Brethren a radical cult: Rudd" *The Australian*, 23 August 2007).

The twenty-one letters from the late August period following Rudd's comment, spread fairly evenly between all three newspapers, almost uniformly dealt with attacks on Howard's relationship with the Brethren, with one letter to the *Australian* offering a surprisingly neutral but clear appraisal of the situation:

The Prime Minister is very quick to disparage Kevin Rudd's judgment. By courting the Exclusive Brethren, a group whose values are strange by any standard, John Howard has spooked a significant proportion of the electorate.

(24 August 2007)

An overwhelming number of these letters fell under the negative category (86%), with the majority (53%) of all letters falling in the "extremely hostile" category. The familiar accusations and themes were all there, though once again Howard's hypocrisy was central:

How is it the Howard regards the Brethren practice as benign and the Muslim one as encouraging terrorism? (*The Australian*, 27 August 2007)

Similarly the responses were overwhelming in favor of Kevin Rudd's stance condemning the Brethren,<sup>39</sup> with letters congratulating Rudd on his display of his "courage to criticize extremist religions," though some featured revealing caveats like: "Rudd would have my vote if he applied the same standard to all extremist religions" (*The Australian*, 27 August). Other letters were far more emphatic and it is clear that among readers Rudd and Howard's contrasting attitudes toward the Brethren were considered politically relevant, particularly in the integrity stakes:

John Howard's courting of a religious cult such as the Exclusive Brethren and Kevin Rudd's refusal to meet with the same group exemplifies the different levels of integrity possessed by these two men. There is no limit to the depths to which the Prime Minister will stop in order to cling to power.

(*The Australian*, 27 August 2007)

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39. This was later to come back and haunt Rudd when it was revealed that he met with Brethren lobbyists and increased the controversial funding of their schools under his "Education Revolution," see Bachelard (2010); Noonan and Bachelard (2008); and Topsfield (2010).

The thing that amazes me about seeing John Howard and Peter Costello cosying up to the Exclusive Brethren is the hypocritical attitude the Prime Minister and Treasurer have to democracy. (*The Australian*, 27 August 2007)

Of all these letters, of course, not everyone was a glowing endorsement of Rudd, and a few letters either defended the Brethren or attacked Rudd's right to comment. Indeed it seems likely that the attacks on the Brethren would have continued had his comments attacking them not coincided so closely with revelations about his infamous trip to a New York strip-club in 2003, as one particularly pointed letter writer noted:

I find it amazing that a man who spent an evening, too drunk to remember, at a strip club and who wants to be prime minister can say that he has real concerns about the effect of the Exclusive Brethren on Australian society.

Surely there are greater concerns: the binge-drinking of our youth (one in four females, one in three males), pornography on the internet and in magazines, or what leads young women to become dancers at strip joints?

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August 2007)

The announcement that Australians would go to the polls on November 24 was made by Howard on October 14 and was immediately met by the airing the following day of the most detailed expose thus far of the Brethren's involvement in politics, the *Four Corners* special "The Brethren Express." Bringing together a flurry of ex-members the documentary showed the extreme lengths members of the Exclusive Brethren had gone to hide their electioneering in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (Belshaw 2007).

Coinciding with these revelations (and largely repeating them) were a series of articles penned by Bachelard beginning on the October 15 with "Two MPs sponsor Brethren lobbyists" (*The Age*, 15 October), exposing how conservative Liberal Party MPs Danna Vale and Michael Ferguson, had sponsored Brethren members for parliamentary lobby passes and also revealing that the Brethren had hired the same PR firm, Jackson-Wells, used by a number of Coalition politicians (and incidentally the soon-to-be far more controversial Church of Scientology).

The Brethren continued to feature as a regular journalistic tool throughout the campaign, a fact exacerbated by revelations that the Coalition would not release correspondence between Howard's office and the Brethren until after the poll ("PM – Brethren letters held until after poll" *The Age* 19 November).<sup>40</sup> Indeed, columnist for the *Australian* and devout atheist Philip Adams' words

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40. The correspondence was eventually released but the revelations were more amusing than sensational. For its content see Bachelard (2008).

exemplified the *vox populi*:

Howard's worst blunders on matters religious were his recent tête-à-têtes with that thoroughly unpleasant cult the Exclusive Brethren. The Brethren's enthusiasms for ultra-conservative social values have led to secretive and generous interventions in Australian and New Zealand election campaigns. But Howard's cordiality toward the cult has cost him, its extremism is unattractive to the wider community, and its theological zeal alienates the mainstream churches.

(*The Australian*, 23 October 2007)

The fact that correspondence on the Brethren almost completely disappears after the November 24 poll is strongly indicative of the political nature of the issue and the symbolic way in which the Brethren had come to powerfully signify and reinforce discontent with the Howard government. This is clearly brought out by the kinds of comments made in letters after the election, for instance, one reader of *The Age* notes that even having been ousted from his seat Howard might still have a future as "a choirboy for the Exclusive Brethren" (26 November 2007), whilst another writer includes the Brethren under a familiar litany of Howard sins:

Conservatives have already started to rewrite history. Greg Sheridan should explain how a decent man could allow the myth of children overboard to go uncorrected, how a decent man would neglect David Hicks, bring in Work Choices without notice to the electorate, remain in denial about AWB bribes, treat refugees so appallingly, and support the Exclusive Brethren.

(*The Australian*, 30 November 2007)

### Conclusion

By looking at these three peak periods over the course of 2006 and 2007 the answer to our initial aim of identifying (1) the events or undertakings which had the most impact on public perceptions of the Exclusive Brethren clearly indicates that public opinion, as demonstrated in the readers' letters, was tightly bound up with the "spiral of signification" surrounding the Exclusive Brethren which consistently linked them to conservative and increasingly unpopular state and federal political campaigns and depicted them as a secret and conniving cabal of sinister cultists with beliefs antithetical to the mainstream Australian values expressed by readers.

While occasional letters from hostile ex-members were printed even these were forced to address these wider social concerns about the Brethren which resonated with the broader community. Put simply, the Brethren were more politically controversial than has traditionally been the case with "cult controversies" and the traditional nexus of familial and social concerns repre-

sented by anti-cult groups were at best downplayed *leitmotifs* in Australian public opinions regarding the Brethren. Only briefly over the “Silly Season” of 2006–2007 and again briefly following Rudd’s labeling of the Brethren as an “extremist cult” do elements of this traditional anti-cult ideology emerge (e.g. brainwashing, comparisons to other “cults”); and these points remained far less emphasized than the group’s political involvement.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly in answering (2) which specific articles and issues struck a responsive chord with readers it is clear from the above that the Brethren’s unpopularity stems mainly from two interrelated and mutually dependent issues.

The first of these issues, comprising the more general criticisms largely expressed by ex-members but also by other letters, regards the high level of “sectarian tension” which the group had maintained vis-à-vis the broader Australian society.<sup>42</sup> It was not uncommon for letter writers to express such sentiments by contrasting the Brethren with broad Australian values, for instance:

The activities of the Exclusive Brethren are un-Australian. I resent the fact that my taxes can be used to support this group of fanatics.

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September 2006)

In a period in which issues of Australian identity were being fiercely debated in the public sphere (Johnson 2007; Maddox 2005a), the Brethren clearly stood out as a group who offended what Bouma has called the Australian “serious shyness of ‘high temperature’ and ‘high demand’ religion” (Bouma 2006, 45). Indeed, as the letters above show, a recurrent theme amongst readers’ letters was that the Brethren’s extremism was akin to that of Islamist fundamentalism; and both were viewed as antithetical to the kind of Australian values championed by the letter writers.

In writing on the measures of “sectarian tension” in a given society Stark and Bainbridge identified three key indicators: (1) different moral and behavioral norms between a group and the wider society; (2) antagonism between a group and the wider society; and (3) separation between a group and the wider society (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 50–66; Zaidman-Dvir and Sharot 1992). It is clear from the examination of the readers’ letters above that each of these three indicators has certainly been met with regard to the Brethren,

41. An excellent example of this is the following letter from *The Australian*:

John Howard seems to be entirely serene in regard to the practice of the Exclusive Brethren and its religious brainwashing of young children. And yet this educational practice is no different from brainwashing in Islamic schools. How is it that Howard regards the Brethren practice as benign and the Muslim one as encouraging terrorism? (27 August 2007)

42. On the issue of “sectarian tension” see Bainbridge and Stark (1980); (1985); (1987); Zaidman-Dvir and Sharot (1992).

and we can conclude from the evidence above that in lieu of this, the Brethren are now viewed as at best quirky god-fearing neighbors and at worst dangerous and unacceptable “cult.” Even those who have defended the group often do so with strong caveats like:

I don’t agree with their religious beliefs or the way in which they endeavor to separate themselves from the rest of the community. I most certainly do not agree with their refusal to allow members to attend tertiary institutions but are willing to benefit from the services of those who do. I find their social exclusion of those who leave the church less than Christian.

(*The Australian*, 27 August 2007)

This said, alongside criticisms of their extremism can be read shades of another aspect Bouma noted in Australian attitudes to religiosity, that is, “a preference to “live and let live” tolerance grounded in mutual respect as opposed to enforcing one group’s viewpoint on others as a primary mode of acceptable inter-religious group relations” (Bouma 2006, 47). While Australians certainly do not endorse the Brethren more extreme practices a number of the letters do show a high degree of this “live and let live” tolerance. As one letter already quoted noted:

For most of us, the beliefs and practices of this religion may not be quite our cup of tea, but it’s a lawful organization and we do claim to be a tolerant society espousing freedom of religion. (*The Australian*, 27 August 2007)

Finally, however, it needs to be emphasized that the consistent high degree of “sectarian tension” only became manifest as a direct response to the Brethren’s trespasses into politics. Setting them quite apart from other NRMs or “cults,” the Brethren had sought since the early 1980s to foster a low public profile, perhaps best exemplified by their mass migration to rural towns and away from the permissive world of cities (Tonts 2001). They do not proselytize nor even advertise the locations of their places of worship. As such, while they have been and remain highly sectarian they have also tried to remain extremely private and little known. As one member told a reporter from the *Age* soon before the controversy began “We’ve nothing to hide, we’re not secretive—we just don’t like being in the public eye” (20 April 2005).

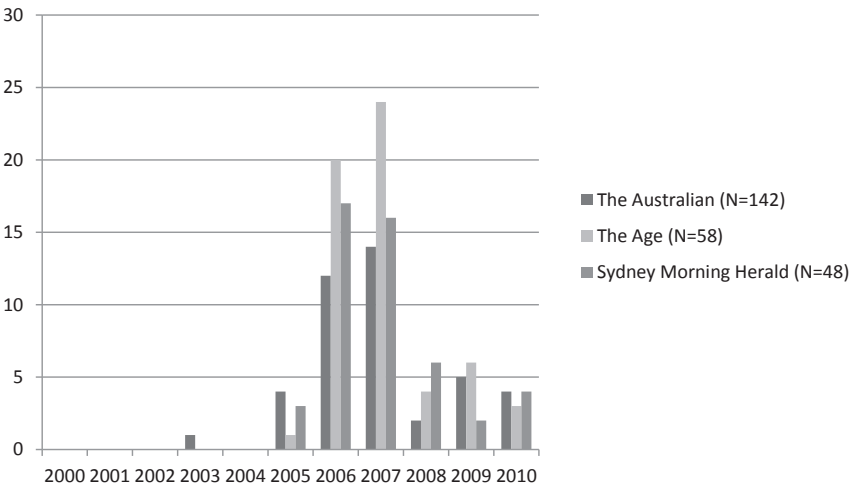
The Brethren’s “sectarian tension” in Australia, then, has existed in an extremely heightened degree since the numerous 1960s reforms of Taylor, yet even when this took on almost ridiculous strictures the group rarely emerged as a topic of media scrutiny (Wilson 1990). Indeed, in the decade between 1990 and 2000 the Brethren were the topic no major article in any of the three newspapers surveyed and only feature as a secondary feature (mentioned in

passing) in four articles over the entire decade. The groups “sectarian tension,” then, is not sufficient to explain the transformation in public perceptions of the Brethren. Rather, a precipitating event and a media willing to run with the story were both needed and any future analysis of the “social construction” of the Brethren controversy would be well advised to recognize this.

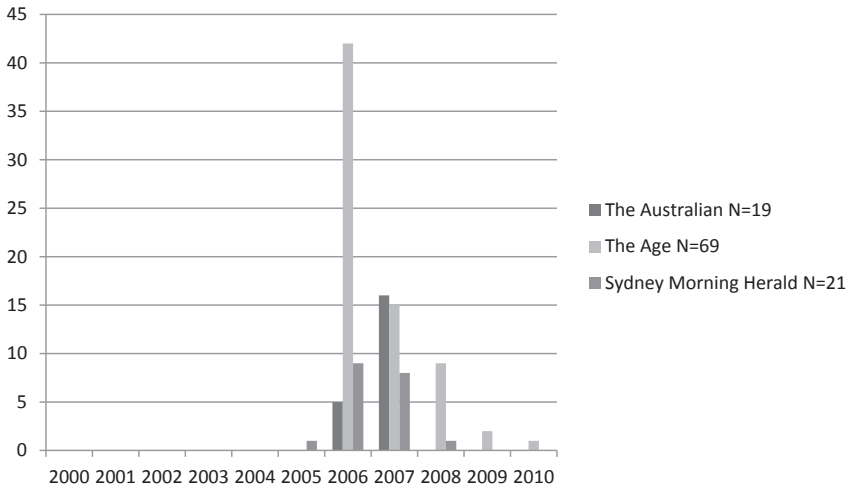
To say that the Brethren were or are a group beyond reproach would be a grave mistake, as Bachelard’s investigative research has amply demonstrated, however, to view the “Brethren Controversy” outside the specific social and political context of the Howard era would be an equally grave mistake; and a disservice to the positive aspects of the Brethren community (Bouma 2006). A social constructionist approach does not deny the existence of problems, but rather attempts to more carefully understand their causes (Best 1993).

With the revelations of their political involvement the Brethren emerged as a prime target for the ideological battles of the late Howard era, and the snowballing effect which this caused in bringing forth angry ex-members and encouraging further coverage catapulted this retiring religious sect into a public sphere with which their religious strictures had ill-prepared them. The somewhat naïve and certainly quirky neighbors described by the first of the letters quoted at the beginning of this article were fast transformed into the extremist cult of the second letter, and indeed in terms of public perception the third letter’s rhetorical question is particularly poignant and worth repeating as to why: “When is a cult not a cult and only a sect? When it canvasses for the Liberal Party, that’s when.” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, January 1 2007).

Appendix 1. Yearly Distribution of Articles and Letters 2000–2010



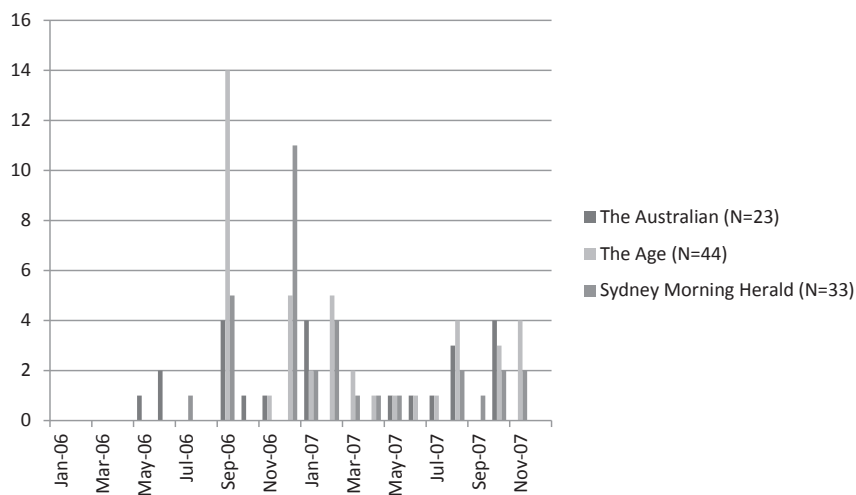
Appendix 1.1 Number of Articles (Yearly) 2000–2010.



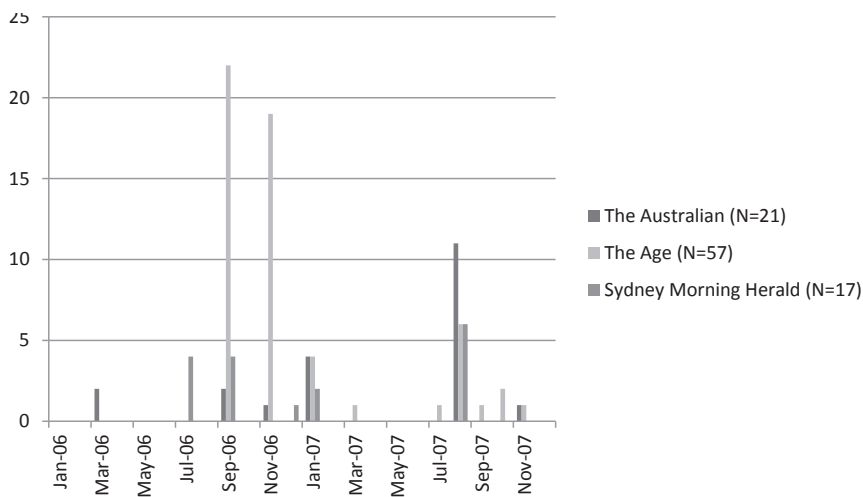
Appendix 1.2 Number of Letters (Yearly) 2000–2010.



## Appendix 2. Monthly Distribution Articles and Letters 2006–2007



Appendix 2.1 Number of Articles (Monthly) 2006–2007.



Appendix 2.2 Number of Letters (Monthly) 2006–2007.

### Appendix 3. Tone of Public Opinion by Individual Newspapers 2000–2010

#### Appendix 3.1 Letters about the Exclusive Brethren in Australian Broadsheets (2000–2010; 109 letters)

| 1                     | 2                    | 3       | 4                    | 5                     |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Extremely<br>Positive | Somewhat<br>Positive | Neutral | Somewhat<br>Negative | Extremely<br>Negative |
| 10 (9%)               | 5 (5%)               | 2 (2%)  | 37 (34%)             | 54 (50%)              |

#### Appendix 3.2 Letters about the Exclusive Brethren in *The Age* (2000–2010; 69 letters)

| 1                     | 2                    | 3        | 4                    | 5                     |
|-----------------------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Extremely<br>Positive | Somewhat<br>Positive | Neutral  | Somewhat<br>Negative | Extremely<br>Negative |
| 7 (1%)                | 1 (0.5%)             | 2 (0.5%) | 23 (33%)             | 36 (52%)              |

#### Appendix 3.3 Letters about the Exclusive Brethren in *The Australian* (2000–2010; 21 letters)

| 1                     | 2                    | 3       | 4                    | 5                     |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Extremely<br>Positive | Somewhat<br>Positive | Neutral | Somewhat<br>Negative | Extremely<br>Negative |
| 2 (10%)               | 2 (10%)              | -       | 7 (33%)              | 10 (47%)              |

#### Appendix 3.4 Letters to the Exclusive Brethren in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2000–2010; 19 letters)

| 1                     | 2                    | 3       | 4                    | 5                     |
|-----------------------|----------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Extremely<br>Positive | Somewhat<br>Positive | Neutral | Somewhat<br>Negative | Extremely<br>Negative |
| 2 (11%)               | 2 (11%)              | -       | 7 (36%)              | 8 (42%)               |

## Appendix 4. Demographic Distribution of Letters

### Gender

| Overall | <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> (N= 19) | <i>The Australian</i> (N=21) | <i>The Age</i> (N =69) |
|---------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| Male    | 15 (79%)                             | 15 (71%)                     | 53 (77%)               |
| Female  | 4 (21%)                              | 3 (14.5 %)                   | 14 (20%)               |
| Unknown | 0                                    | 3 (14.5%)                    | 2 (3%)                 |

### Location

| Overall | <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> | <i>The Australian</i> | <i>The Age</i> |
|---------|------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Rural   | 5 (26%)                      | 3 (14%)               | 14 (20%)       |
| Urban   | 14 (74%)                     | 18 (86%)              | 55 (80%)       |

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