

Why the New Zealand Plymouth Brethren Intervened in Politics in 2005

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the significance of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church's (PBCC) intervention into New Zealand politics in the 2005 General Election through its circulation of pamphlets attacking all parties other than the National Party. Accusations at the time revealed that the National Party knew of the plans, and the result probably affected the outcome of a closely fought election. A subsequent political expose by Nicky Hagar revealed the extensive contact between that political party and the PBCC leaders. The paper explains the background for the intervention by the PBCC, and identifies the significance of this for the PBCC and for New Zealand politics.

KEYWORDS: PBCC, Exclusive Brethren, Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, New Zealand 2005 Elections, Don Brash, Bruce Hales.

Introduction: Surprising Revelations

When the news broke about the source of the anti-Green-Party leaflets, widely distributed throughout New Zealand just prior to the 2005 election, a reporter asked me what I thought of the possibility that the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church were involved. I confessed amazement that a group with such a high degree of privacy and an a-political stance would commit themselves to one side in a New Zealand election (McKenzie-McLean 2005). I called it a sheer paradox. This article is my act of contrition for getting it so wrong. While the case proves not to be unique or even the first such intervention, it marked the first public exposure of this change in Brethren approaches to politics. The paper sets the intervention in the context of Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC) presence in New Zealand, and the consequences of the sharp exposure of them for the Party that they backed as well as for their own profile.

Caught Red-Handed

In New Zealand under the system of Mixed Member Parliamentary democracy (MMP) adopted in 1993, all political literature in the months after the announcement of an election date must be authorized by an agent, who must provide their name and address on every piece of literature. There is a maximum sum (\$20,000 NZD in 2005) that each candidate may spend on seeking election. Overall party expenditure is limited to \$1 million plus that permitted to individual candidates, so in the case of a party standing candidates in all 120 seats, the overall total is \$2.4 million. Expenses incurred by an outsider to support the same cause need to be counted as expenses incurred by that party. The source of donations to a candidate above a certain level needs to be declared, although that level has been subject to much debate since the 1993 legislation. These rules are based on the historic English electoral abuse of “treating” to induce people to vote for specific candidates, and have been often reviewed (Geddis 2007). They were particularly controversial in 2005, because the Labour Party-based Government, which was struggling for financial support, had issued an election pledge card, which it claimed was exempt from election expenses and was not paid for by the party but out of government funds. Meanwhile the National Party, which was unlike Labour, flush with funds beyond what it could spend in the election period, had begun electioneering advertisements before the election had been declared, thus partially evading the expenditure restrictions.

Then on 3 September, just two weeks before the General Election was scheduled, pamphlets began to appear in letter boxes across the country, attacking the Green Party, an environmental party which has had significant support since the 1990s. The leaflets did not declare their support for any specific party. The leader of the National Party and leader of the opposition in Parliament, Don Brash, was emphatic in the face of media questions on Monday 5 September that his party had nothing to do with the campaign, and of course any other stance would have required them to declare the costs as part of National’s electoral expenses (Hager 2006, 30–1). The issue intensified over the next few days as further pamphlets appeared, most only distributed in parts of the country. In the end, seven pamphlets appeared, and there was unexpectedly intense interest as to the authors of the pamphlets.

The name appearing as the authorizing agent on the first pamphlet (“the Green Delusion”) was Stephen Myles Win of Favona Road in the suburb of Mangere in New Zealand’s largest city, Auckland, very close to the large Auckland Exclusive Brethren central hall. While Stephen Win had no public profile, his brother Phil Win was known to be a prominent member of the Brethren, and this was the first clue of the source of the pamphlets. J. Hawkins of Brent Place in Christchurch, identified as the member of a group calling itself “New Zealand Advocates for Timely Healthcare” was named as the authorizer of a pamphlet on healthcare, which urged people to “use your party vote to put someone else in charge.” Later leaflets on why people leave for Australia were authorized by S.A. Smith of New Plymouth, while a call for a budget surplus to be distributed by way of tax cuts (“claim your seat to watch the All Black Action”) was authorized by M. Powell of 30 Stephen Lynsar Place, Mt Roskill, in Auckland. J. Charles Thomas, of Sutton Place, Richmond in Nelson authorized a pamphlet focused on senior citizens, and there were a couple of other pamphlets focusing on health needs and defense needs. None of these pamphlets focused on what one might have thought of as Brethren values. Admittedly there was a passing reference to declining moral values in one pamphlet, and to restoring the family as the cornerstone of our society (along with retaining the existing flag of the country and rebuilding the defense force, these concerns were named as the “sacred values” of the state). No party was ever explicitly recommended, but the parties on the blacklist were very explicitly identified as Labour and the Greens, which were the key members of the existing government.

Jeanette Fitzsimons, the co-leader of the Green Party, was the first politician to complain and identify the Exclusive Brethren as the source of the pamphlets (McKenzie-McLean 2005). Immediately suspicions were aroused that this was a campaign at the behest of the National Party. National candidates for election were questioned by reporters, and some admitted that they had been offered help by Exclusive Brethren members (Brown 2005). By the end of the week, National politicians were forced to admit that they knew of the Brethren’s plans. It was a very damaging admission for National so late in the election campaign, and the bad publicity is generally recognized as contributing significantly to their loss at the election booths, after having previously led in the opinion polls.

One consequence of the controversy was an act of parliament passed in the next session by the Labour-led coalition, which required anonymous donations to

political parties to be disclosed if they cost more than \$1000 for any one candidate or \$10,000 per party. It further required “third parties” (like the Brethren) to be registered as political groups if they spent more than \$12,000 a year and aimed to influence voters. Such groups were allowed a maximum of \$120,000, if they were not standing candidates in their own name (James 2008).

The issue was not easily forgotten, for at the end of 2006 a very significant book by Nicky Hager was published, *The Hollow Men: A Study in the Politics of Deception*. There was intense public interest in this book, which highlighted in its opening chapter the secret deal between the National Party and the Exclusive Brethren, and went on to reveal other ways in which the National Party ignored all principles and disguised its key values, to seek victory in the 2005 election. Based on a cache of leaked emails from the National Party office, the source of which remains a matter of debate, it is recognized as a classic of political exposes. While this expose brought unwelcome negative reputation for the National Party, a change in leadership and direction enabled it to wash its hands of its mistakes. For the Exclusive Brethren it was more serious, for the public reaction to their involvement was so unremittingly negative that it must have come as an unpleasant shock.

Reputation of the Exclusive Brethren

Within the New Zealand scene, the reputation of the Exclusive Brethren had been particularly sullied by a major stoush with the argumentative National Member of Parliament for Nelson, Nick Smith. Nelson was the place of origin of the Brethren and they remained strong there. When Smith criticized their behavior and actions in a child custody case, he was sued for \$4 million by the Brethren. The case was that of Stan and Julia Field, for when they were placed under discipline by the Exclusive Brethren, the grandparents, Geoff and Letitia Hickmott of Rangiora, who were very prominent in the church, used a court order to gain custody of the children. It took three years for the parents to recover their children (Brett 1993; *Nelson Mail*, 16.9.1997; *New Zealand Herald*, 16.11.1994). Smith used parliamentary privilege in a speech of 11 November 1992 to criticize the Brethren. As he said in his speech (which did not name the couple but did name the Exclusive Brethren),

The public face of the church is that of a group of hard-working honest people who keep very much to themselves and do no harm. But there is a more sinister side to the church, which is involved in extreme forms of psychological blackmail, which is used to rip families apart in the name of Christianity (Parliament, New Zealand 1992).

He was subsequently charged with being in contempt of the ruling of the Family Court, but public sympathy was almost entirely with him. Edward Malcolm, a prominent member of the Exclusive Brethren in Nelson and a seller of farm machinery, was a key player in the dispute, and the Brethren used a private detective to find evidence against the suitability of the Fields as parents (Brett 1993). This case continued to be discussed as late as 2006 (*New Zealand Herald*, 14.10.2006). The debate even led to an amendment to the law relating to custody (Ahdar 1996).

Nick Smith was an elected member of the National Party and perhaps that is why he was curiously sympathetic to the Brethren when interviewed in 2005 about their political intervention (Phillips 2005). This was probably a clue to the rather remarkable change in approach taken by the Brethren at the time.

Brethren willingness to split families when some in the family had left the church had been apparent from the time that the doctrine of separation was applied more stringently to families from the early 1960s. In 1962, there was a burst of public concern about cases of this, mirroring parallel exposure and debates in Britain and Australia. In May 1962, there was publicity about an act of repentance required of a member who wanted to recover his wife from whom he had been separated (*Evening Post*, 3.5.1962). In June 1962, Mr. Miles Allen ordered his grandmother to leave his house, provoking public concern (*Evening Post*, 20.6.1962). There were further cases of family splits publicized in July 1962 (*Evening Post*, 21.7.1962). There were tentative police investigations into Brethren actions at this time (*Evening Post*, 7.5.1962;17.5.1962). The then Minister of Justice pondered the need for a public inquiry, but apparently decided against it (*Evening Post*, 2.5.1962).

As the movement experienced rifts in the 1970s, there were further cases of family schisms evidently ordered by the church, some of which attracted attention from the media, including the Woods family of Motueka. As a result, James Symington (1913–1987), the international leader or “man of God” of the movement, visited Christchurch in 1977, but the result was no move from the

approach, as is evident in the similar case of separation involving Murray Turley of Wellington in 1978 (Brett 1993, 49).

Exclusive Brethren Pain

Exclusive Brethren were highly upset as a group at the level of vituperation levelled in their direction in 2005 and 2006. A petition by Graeme Turley and 26 other people presented to Parliament by the Hon Peter Dunne on 6 October 2006 and reported back on 10 May 2007 asked:

That the House instruct its members to desist from denigrating a minority group known as the Exclusive Brethren because some of its members independently chose to lawfully participate in the 2005 election debate (Parliament, New Zealand 2005).

The Standing Orders Committee of the House of Representatives declined to make such a recommendation.

Meanwhile David J. McLean asked for an opportunity to respond to comments on behalf of the Exclusive Brethren community to statements in the House by Jill Pettis MP on 24 May 2006 and by the Hon Phil Goff on 14 June and on 6 September 2006. This was tabled in the House and entered on the official record on 8 November 2006. Pettis had commented that “the Brethren were not concerned about moral issues at all, but were just concerned about power, influence, and money” and Goff had said that the Brethren were a “clandestine” and “extremist” group and that they showed “lies and dishonesty” in respect of election advertising. The Brethren response said that these comments were “very hurtful to us” and that the Brethren were very concerned about legislation about prostitution, gay relationships “and other bills that conflict with the teachings of the Bible to which we hold dear” (Parliament, New Zealand 2006). This approach was consistent with the approach taken to public attacks in other countries.

There is doubtless an element of truth in the protestations, although anyone with knowledge of how the Exclusive Brethren functions would know that the Brethren can readily deny responsibility for anything done by members since very little is done formally in the name of the Brethren. Yet the Brethren operate as a closely knit community, with an emphasis on consistent international approaches and standards. So, while in one sense the political interventions were private initiatives, it is inconceivable that they could have been undertaken without some kind of approval, and it seems certain that Brethren throughout the country were

well aware of the publicity about to be distributed. At the same time many members approached National Party candidates, although the letters indicating this were probably deliberately destroyed. Ex-members have certainly confirmed that they were encouraged to do this.

Scale and Expansion

The issue was particularly significant because the Brethren history in New Zealand has meant that they are probably stronger in New Zealand than in any other country. The PBCC give their total numbers today as over 50,000, and indicate that 15,000 of these are in Australia. This works out at about 0.06% of the population. The New Zealand proportion is approximately double this level, because of the significant impact of both Open and Exclusive Brethren in dairying districts in the nineteenth century (Lineham 1977).

There are two sources to establish Brethren numbers, the religion question in the official census (New Zealand Government Department of Statistics 2001–2018), and the assembly address list circulated within the movement. There were about 55 assemblies in New Zealand in 1950, and perhaps some 5,000 adherents and their children. By 1957 the assembly list published included some 71 assemblies. The concentration of these was very remarkable. Except for Dunedin, Timaru, and Gisborne, Brethren were clustered in specific regions. There were 11 assemblies in Northland, 13 in Auckland and South Auckland, four in the Waikato, three in Thames and Tauranga, two in Taranaki, three in Hawke's Bay, eight in the Manawatu, nine in Nelson, and seven in Central Canterbury. If one assumed 50 members in each (rather high for some country assemblies), one would reach a total in fellowship of 3,550 adults plus perhaps another 1,500 children, for Exclusive Brethren birth rates are high, so that would bring total numbers to 5,000. There is some confirmation of this in the acknowledged figure of some 850 Brethren in the upper South Island in the 1990s (Brett 1993, 49).

In recent years, the government census has distinguished Exclusive Brethren from Open Brethren, and this has provided an alternative source of information. In 2001, 1,947 people described themselves as Exclusive Brethren, 435 as Plymouth Brethren, and 7,503 as Brethren not further defined (but this probably included some of the Open Brethren although these were also separately listed at

10,149 people). The 2006 census recorded 2,313 Exclusive Brethren and 324 Plymouth Brethren and 6,663 Brethren Not Further Defined, with 10,134 Open Brethren. In 2013, at the time when Exclusive Brethren had decided to rebrand themselves, just 219 people called themselves Exclusive Brethren, but 5,388 people described themselves as Plymouth Brethren, and so we can be reasonably confident that the total number of these Brethren was about 5,670 or 0.13% of the total population. In 2018 the total of “Exclusive or Plymouth Brethren” was 6,822, a growth to 0.15% of the population (New Zealand Government Department of Statistics 2001–2018). These numbers are reasonably consistent with the address list books issued in the period.

As for regional concentrations, in the 2013 census, the places with the highest percentage of Plymouth Brethren were in the extreme north of the country at Three Mile Bush in the Whangarei region (3%), Dargaville (3.18%), Maungaturoto (12.3%), Kaiwaka (5.18%), Wellsford (6.36%), and across the whole Kaipara district (1.91%). In the main city of Auckland, the Rodney, Puketapapa, and Papakura boards were the only ones where Exclusive Brethren numbers were above 0.25%. Frimley in the Hastings area (5.01%), Churton Park in Wellington (1.45%), and Pahiatua (4.48%) were places of remarkable Brethren presence in the lower parts of the North Island. In the South Island, the strongest areas were the thinly populated West Coast where both Buller and Grey district were above 0.5%, and Orowati near Westport reached 5%. The Brethren origins in New Zealand were also places of strength, for the Tasman district proportion was 0.32% and Saxton in Nelson reached 2.03%. In the eastern province of Canterbury, the Waimakariri district’s proportion was 0.28% and Southbrook in Rangiora 3%, while the Ashburton proportion was 0.24% and the Timaru district 0.36%, with Washdyke and Gleniti near Timaru reaching 3.13% and 1.64% respectively. The Waitaki district and Invercargill were also above 0.25%.

This geography shows that the areas of strength parallel those of the Open Brethren especially prior to the 1960s, although sometimes one or the other group dominates. In the country areas of the Manawatu all types of Brethren are very strong, but the Open Brethren dominate in the Rongotea and Feilding areas while Exclusive Brethren are dominant in the Ashhurst and Foxton districts. The same pattern is evident in Nelson and Canterbury. This reflects the common origins of the movement, and their appeal to the same sorts of people, notably

self-made people, especially dairy farmers, opponents of the hierarchical society. These trends are changing as Exclusive Brethren have urbanized, and under John S. Hales (1922–2002) and Bruce Hales as the leaders of the movement members have been relocated to new regions, with the evident aim to spread a Brethren presence across the world, and this has meant that Brethren have been directed to move to specific places in New Zealand to ensure that the “Testimony” remain strong. Moreover, the system of monthly “interchange” meetings initiated by James Symington, requires that there be clusters of assemblies in each region. The trust document for the Cambridge East Gospel Trust, which erected a very large building in 2003–6 to provide suitable accommodation for national gatherings, included provision for no insurance, and “the Minister of the Lord in the Recovery,” Bruce Hales, was required under the terms of the document to sanction all decisions of the Trust (*Dominion Post*, 30.9.2006).

The recent censuses indicate that the PBCC is a growing community in New Zealand, with the highest proportions of the age cohort in all the age groups from 5 to 29. The lowest age groups were in the 40s and 50s, probably reflecting significant departures from the fold in the 1970s through to the 1990s. (The pattern is very similar in Australia). Ethnically, all members labelled themselves as New Zealand Europeans.

Business Patterns

Before the 1960s, Brethren were particularly strong in dairying districts, but the policies of that era meant that many sold farms and moved into the towns. The stronger Brethren families have since then sought new business opportunities, although many of these related to rural service industries. There is an indication of their current profile in what we know of the names publicized during the 2005 controversy. Richard Simmons of Timaru owned and operated Aspect Furnishings. He was the brother of Andrew and Neville Simmons of Aspect Interiors in Auckland, members of the so-called “secret seven,” the group of Exclusive Brethren that held a press conference during the election controversy. The father of these three men, Harold, had business dealings with Bruce Hales, the Sydney-based world leader of the movement (*Dominion Post*, 28.9.2006; Hume 2005). Greg Mason, another of these men, operated Pump and Valve Specialties (Hume 2005). The Newman family in Auckland owned and operated

Formsteel Industries Ltd. Andy Smith owned a farm machinery business in the Hawkes Bay as well as Strategic Information Services. Tim Lough owned a Wellington concrete products business, and Doug Watt ran OMC Power Equipment in Christchurch. Allan David was the director of Wanganui produce and welding companies (Hume 2005, *Dominion Post*, 28.9.2006). This characteristic of private business operators seems to be reflected at other levels of the body. Reporters in Dargaville in Northland investigated Brethren businesses in 2005 and identified their ownership of twelve firms in this small rural town (Shepherd 2006).

Business developments were hampered in the 1970s and 1980s by the Brethren's view that computers were part of the strategy of the anti-Christ, seeking to destroy Christian profession. This approach did not align with the outlook of the new and more commercially connected Australian leadership. In 1990 Brethren still abhorred computers but found ways to accommodate electric typewriters and pocket calculators (Smellie 2006). There was a gradual change of policy in subsequent years, as businesses were required to place bar codes on goods, and as computers became part of the fabric of ordinary life (Chapman 1999). By 2006, computers were being used "in a limited way" but the Brethren said they "recoil from the filth of the internet," radio, TV and movies (*ABC Premium News*, 27.12.2006). EAN New Zealand, the official bar code issuers in New Zealand, came to an informal understanding that Exclusive Brethren could have their manufactured goods bar-coded by third parties, usually warehousemen or marketers (EAN New Zealand c. 1990). By 2018, the new Brethren website could boast that "we use the latest technology in our schools" (PBCC 2018).

Brethren found a new solution to the issues by setting up their own "Universal Business Team." This enabled Brethren businesses to draw on strengths from each other to provide group purchasing advantages, training courses, standard accounting and to put the profits into the Rapid Relief Team. UBT's list of New Zealand providers included a broad range of businesses, some but not all of them Brethren (UBT 2021). This included their own telephone system, computing and sources of financial support. As the system developed in the early 2000s, the benefits and costs became clear. Brethren businesses were massively supported by a shared network, but it also tied in businesses, making it almost impossible for anyone to leave. Bruce Hales, the elect leader of the movement, in a celebratory article noted that after the 1970s Brethren rarely worked for non-Brethren, and

estimated that there in Australia there were 1,000 Brethren businesses, employing some 3,500 Brethren and 4,000 non-Brethren employees. This indicates that the PBCC were concentrated in small businesses, which were increasingly high-tech, and contributed \$2.2 billion to the Australian economy (Hales 2007). The contribution to the New Zealand economy would be smaller, but at the same time, because of the proportion of the population, relatively higher.

The Doctrine of Separation in New Zealand

It is precisely because of the significant clustering of the Brethren in tight communities where they stand out strikingly, that the Exclusive Brethren are very well known in some parts of New Zealand. And this contributed to the adverse reaction to their political engagement in 2005, and made it difficult to disguise their involvement.

Exclusive Brethren had long been marked out (especially compared to their cousins, the Open Brethren) for their focused separation from “the world.” During the World Wars most if not all refused to be members of the armed forces (Lineham 2017a). They did not vote in national or local elections, they did not participate in community events, and after the 1950s they did not share food with outsiders. The practice of separation became sharper in the late 1950s, and at this time, contacts with relatives and neighborly behavior ended (*Craccum* 1970). Exposure to secular media was long seen as dangerous. Radios were forbidden probably as early as the 1920s, and subsequently television, videos, attendance at cinemas or theatres, radio telephones, fax machines, higher education, libraries, and competitive sport were all prohibited (Brett 1993, 43). In July 1961, Exclusive Brethren withdrew from the cooperative Waimea Dairy Company, since they were not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers based on their understanding of the “unequal yoke” in *2 Corinthians* 6:14, and this forced them to sell dairy farms, since the only way to sell their milk was as members of a cooperative dairy factory (*Evening Post*, 2.7.1961). In 1962 Taranaki Brethren resigned from the farmers’ bobby calf pools, whereby male calves were combined into large clusters for auction as meat, and the same happened in Bunnythorpe in the Manawatu a month later (*Evening Post*, 4.5.1962; 19.6.1962). These

precedents effectively forced Brethren out of their traditional occupations as dairy farmers in New Zealand.

Arrangements with Unions

In the employment sphere, Brethren had long objected to belonging to unions. With the advent of the Labour Government in 1935, compulsory unionism was introduced in the large employers, especially in government departments. A Head Office directive in March 1940 required railway employees to be union members. At this time, a flood of protests was received from both Open Brethren and Exclusive Brethren. For example, W.E. Cox from Wellington protested that he could not be unequally yoked, and offered to pay a donation in lieu. Walter Broomhall would not pay a donation to union funds “so it does not implicate me in unionism or its principle.” H.N. Suckling, a carpenter from Whangarei explained “my religious belief being that I will not link with any association.” S.L. Hart from Palmerston North who had scriptural objections came from an Exclusive Brethren family (Archives New Zealand 1946–54). A circular in April 1946 allowed for an exemption from union membership based on religious belief. Subsequent files in the Railways Department indicate continued requests like the one from S.A. Bishop, chief clerk for the locomotive engineers in Auckland, who declared that “my understanding of the Holy Scriptures does not permit me joining up with any union or society amongst which some do not accept the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and Kenneth M. King of the Parcels Office in Hastings, writing that,

I have a conscience which does not permit me to join any other association than that to which I belong. During the past eleven or twelve years I have walked in happy fellowship with others in the light of the first epistle of Corinthians Chapter one, verse nine.

R.H. Reardon a turner in the Hutt wrote that “I am a separated Christian and as such am not free to be a member of the above organisations,” and Roland Geddes Bishop of the District Civil Engineers office in Auckland declared that: “I feel that as a Christian I could not with a clear conscience be a member of a union which if necessary will set itself up against the Authority of a Government which I believe to be characteristically constituted of God”—interesting reasoning indeed! E.C. Cottle of Road Services, Hastings commented that “on account of the association such a fellowship belongs. I belong to one fellowship, Sir, having been called to

the fellowship of Jesus Christ our Lord which precludes me from joining any other,” while Howard Cecil Malcolm said that “unionism at every point strikes athwart of Christianity; is inveterately opposed to it, hence, to join a union would be a violation of conscience.” F.H. Furness of Otahuhu Workshops straightforwardly explained that he was Exclusive Brethren and that no man could serve two masters, nor be in subjection to rulers and strike—so was one master the state? (Archives New Zealand 1946–54). The Union Membership Exemption Tribunal from 1948 to 1991 processed 1,884 claims for exemption (Archives New Zealand 1948–91). The changing legislation and its effect exempting Exclusive Brethren from union membership was made public in 1952 (*Evening Post*, 28.6.1952).

The issue was even more explosive in the light of Brethren loss of reputation after 1959. In 1962, Fintan Patrick Walsh (1894–1963), the head of the Federation of Labour, publicly expressed his discontent with the Brethren (*Evening Post*, 20.3.1962). Union issues exploded at this time, with calls for exemption in various places (*Evening Post*, 27.4.1962; 31.5.1962; 6.6.1962). The Court of Arbitration was asked to rule about the status of Fishers Bakery in Blenheim, W.R. Etchells in Hamilton, and others (*Evening Post*, 11.7.1962). Thirty members attended a court hearing before H.J. Thompson Stipendiary Magistrate, in September 1962, insisting that they would disown members forced to be in the union, but the court refused exemptions (*Evening Post*, 11.9.1962; 14.9.1962). R.M. Holmes was, however, exempted from joining the Transport Alliance (*Evening Post*, 22.9.1962).

As Exclusive Brethren increasingly provided jobs for fellow Brethren, the problem shifted to that of Brethren employers and their cautions about their non-Brethren employees. A group of employers sought an exemption from the closed shop rules in October 1962, among them Charles B. Ivory of Ivory Brothers, Petone (who assured a court that he would be forced out of business if an exemption were not given), P. and D. Duncan of Dunedin, Field Machinery Limited in Palmerston North, Forrest Engineering Ltd, C.W. Blackman of Cambridge, E.N. Davis Ltd of Palmerston North and A.M. Gorrie Ltd of Whangarei. The union’s concern was that these employers would not provide fairly for workers. S.R. Farquhar of Palmerston North interpreted the law as requiring him to dismiss employees who were not in the union (*Evening Post*, 9.10.1962; 10.10.1962; 11.10.1962). Judge Archer ruled in November that

Exclusive Brethren could employ fellow members who were not union members, but this was the only exemption that was available to them (*Evening Post*, 2.11.1962).

The issue continued in a new form, as the character of Brethren businesses changed. The traditional or farm related businesses expanded, and some very canny investments made the group very wealthy. The Employment Relations Act of 2000 (designed by the Labour Government to help unions recover from years of deregulation under the National Government of 1990–1998) granted an exemption from union access to employers of less than 20 workers where the owner was members of a religious society—legislation designed to assist the scruples of Exclusive Brethren (Honey 2007). The growth of Exclusive Brethren businesses meant that many non-Brethren employees were quite vulnerable. At that time, 649 employers had exemption rights. In a very curious case in 2004, Maurice Clist, the owner of the Fort Richards laboratory in South Auckland, decided to prohibit people speaking in foreign languages in the lunchroom. In reaction to this astonishing demand by this Exclusive Brethren employer, the large EPMU union asked Parliament to rescind right of Exclusive Brethren to bar union officials from their workplace (*New Zealand Herald*, 26.6.2004; 1.7.2004). Clist defended his actions by explaining that he was “just following my conscience. I am answerable to God. The principle is the issue and I really have to follow my conscience” (*New Zealand Herald*, 25.8.2004).

Alleged Abuses

By the early 2000s secular society in New Zealand and Australia widely suspected closed religious groups of sexual abuse. Inevitably some of this suspicion was directed at the Exclusive Brethren, and may have colored reactions to their political engagement. There have been some allegations about this in connection with the Brethren, and there were allegations swirling in Nelson about this time. Moreover Ngaire Thomas, a former member of the Exclusive Brethren, in 2004 published a colorful account of her life in the Brethren that reflected that young women were frequently abused in the Brethren by the young men (Thomas 2004, 79, 83, 128–29; Cornell 2007). In 2016, a New Zealand newspaper gave publicity to an English doctoral student’s unverified claim that Exclusive Brethren had a higher rate of sexual abuse than typical people in the community.

Exclusive Brethren authorities responded fiercely, criticizing the methodology of the process (Hurley 2016; [PBCC] 2016). There is a public impression that sects are places where sexual abuse flourishes, and there may be some truth in the argument that a closed group is inclined to protect its own, but Brethren certainly have no intellectual sympathy with sexual abuse, and have handed known offenders over to the police. The Exclusive Brethren were not named by the Australian Royal Commission into sexual abuse, which has castigated many church bodies. Some of those excluded from the Brethren stand accused of immoral conduct (Hubbard 2009).

Sectarian groups have faced a suspicious reception particularly since various American groups (the Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians) have been involved in mass deaths. In New Zealand this has led to suspicion of Gloriavale, a Pentecostal communitarian group. The Brethren have needed and wanted to keep very distinct from this reputation, and some of their actions suggest how very different they are, separatists with a more positive outlook about the secular government.

The Growth of Separate Brethren Schooling

Until 1993, Exclusive Brethren attended state schools, although they were exempted from attending school assemblies. Higher education was not permitted after the 1960s. In some schools attended by significant numbers of Brethren children, for example Dargaville District High School and Onslow College, the issues were well traversed. Then in July 1991, Bruce Hales, son and future heir of the then leader, John S. Hales of Sydney, wrote to the Marsden High School principal, outlining a philosophy for a separate system of education. Their school was registered in September 1993, and covered years 7-9, while students in years 10-12 were enrolled in distance education. Then an emphasis on separate schools employing qualified teachers was authorized (Westmount Education Trust 2002). In England 64 schools were organized into the Focus Education Trust as from 2004 (Focus Learning Trust 2004).

In New Zealand, this policy was slowly implemented from 1993. Home schooling was widely used by Brethren for the junior years, secondary schooling was expensive, and because they had no qualified teachers, they needed to employ people from outside. In New Zealand they were enrolled in the Correspondence

Schools (Lockey 1994). Internationally, Brethren schools began to be established around 2000, especially for intermediate aged children and above. Bridgemount School was established in Auckland in May 2001; and Aurora College in Invercargill in 2001 with fourteen pupils. In November 2002, a national meeting was held of the Westmount Education Trust at the Bridgemount campus. It was attended by representatives of the school trusts throughout the country including Stephen Crawshaw, Garth Currie, Mark Hewitson, Peter Hickmott, Greg Mason, Steven Moore, Neville Simmons, Andrew Smith, Jeremy Suckling, John Anderson, Stephen Hales, and David Stewart, representing the fifteen education trusts that had been established. The strong emphasis came on a unified approach, guided by Bruce Hales. So, gradually the schools became campuses of a single College with branches throughout New Zealand (Lineham 2017b). There were 88 students in Auckland and up to 950 students as additional sites were opened in Wellington, Northland, Westport, Nelson, and Christchurch (the latter with 75 students) (Ministry of Education n.d.). By 2006, there were 661 students in these schools, 338 below year 11 and none in year 13 (Ministry of Education n.d.). In Dunedin, permission was granted to build a school in December 2006 but in 2019 the decision was made to merge the schools in Dunedin and Invercargill on a combined site in Gore (Kelly 2019). In 2009, the roll stood at 1,555, and government funding of \$2 million was acknowledged (*Press*, 31.1.2009). Then in 2010 there was controversy when the KeriKeri campus (in the far north) sacked a teacher who had used a contemporary version of King Lear in English classes (*New Zealand Herald*, 2.5.2010; Barratt 2010). The 2017 ERO report indicated that there were eleven campuses, and that the schools belonged to an international body, OneSchool Global Organisation. That report said that there were 1,612 students in the school covering from Year 3 to Year 13, and it noted that all of them were of European ethnicity (Education Review Office 2017). Since then, the schools have been renamed “OneSchool Global” along with 130 associated schools throughout the world, and the roll remains stable at 1,626 in 2020.

Separate schooling was a very expensive solution, and it has focused much of the energy and capital of Brethren in recent years. For example, the Westmount campus erected in Palmerston North in 2018 cost some \$10 million (Tuckey 2018). As for higher education, since about 2005 Exclusive Brethren have been permitted to enroll for extramural studies. This will enable them to be less dependent on outside professionals.

Political Involvement

These changed features of Brethren life in one sense have marked them out as a separate community, even more distinct from the general world. Yet in another sense they have subjected the Brethren to state regulation, from education, tax, and customs agencies. Operating as a block, the Brethren count as significant clients, for example in the purchase of computers, telecommunication, travel, and business support. Under Bruce Hales, they have smartly recognized that they can maximize their benefits by acting as a collective. It was this factor, along with the classic response of the small employers in resisting government interference, that seems to have been critical in attracting them to political engagement.

Certainly, there was a moral element as well. As early as 1993, Exclusive Brethren in the United States lobbied the US House and Senate on 29 July 1993 in support of an attempted ban on homosexuals in the military. They were also concerned about abortion legislation (Scott, Markham, and McGregor 1993; “Conscience and Freedom of Choice” 1992). Under Bruce Hales, however, their concerns broadened. In 2004, “our beloved brother” (Bruce Hales), deemed that “the re-election of President Bush is extremely critical,” and Brethren were urged to do what they could to support this, and to highlight critical issues in Israel and against same-sex marriage, but also advocating for America to gain a proper healthcare system (Commission for Representation to U.S. Government 2004). (The latter concern probably suggests that antipodean health systems set the standard in their minds.) A leaflet was widely distributed, “America is at the Crossroads,” highlighting the threat to true marriage, the threat to our schoolchildren and the threat to human life” (Defending Moral Values 2012). There were similar interventions in Australia. A letter to John Howard, the Australian Prime Minister, praised him for his involvement in the Iraq War and criticized the United Nations ([PBCC] 2003). They appear to have paid for an advertisement in support of John Howard in the 2004 federal elections authorized by Stephen Hales (Bruce Hales’ brother). The brochure, “The Green Delusion,” issued in New Zealand in 2005 was a modified version of a brochure distributed in Tasmania, “funded by a group of concerned Tasmanian families” in 2004 ([PBCC] 2004). Some thought the central concern of the Brethren was homosexual marriage, but if so, it was rarely explicit in their published literature (Marr 2006). The Brethren were intensely opposed to Bob Brown from Tasmania, the Greens leader and Australian Senator 1996–2012, a controversial

gay politician notorious for his opposition to Australian involvement in the Iraq War. He demanded in 2006 that Brethren political interventions be reviewed, but the Senate voted against this. Brown suggested that their motivation was legislative protection of their efforts to protect their interests when members left the movement, but the Senate seems to have viewed his campaign as a personal vendetta (*ABC Premium News*, 27.12.2006).

The leader of the PBCC from 2002, Bruce Hales, was much more a man of the world than most of his predecessors. He and fellow Brethren shared concerns often expressed by small businesses that growing regulations were hampering their business growth. There was a surprisingly secular focus on monetary pressures. The Exclusive Brethren regime today seems much less theological and more pragmatic, but no less closed and exclusive (Dent c. 2007).

These political interventions before 2005 in Australia, Canada and the USA were in contexts where third party pressure groups were permitted a great deal of freedom. In New Zealand, regulation extended even to electioneering. Moreover, in those cases they were supporting the existing government. In New Zealand, they found themselves in 2005 very alienated from a government led by a woman (Helen Clark) with a radical social agenda (civil unions and the legalization of prostitution had taken place in 2004), and intent on increasing business regulation after fifteen years of deregulation. So, there were particular reasons for their intense hostility to this government, although, as Massimo Introvigne has shown, there were parallel intense pressures at the time over their registration as a charity in Britain and elsewhere (Introvigne 2018, 100–2).

The Brethren Versus the Left

There can be no surprise, therefore, that the Brethren in New Zealand identified with the National Party. That party had struggled with its directions and leadership in the face of Clark, and chose Don Brash, the academically highly trained former head of the Reserve Bank, as their leader in 2003, shortly after his election to parliament. Brash marked a move to the right for the party, with his opposition to Maori ambitions. Brash, son of a noted Presbyterian minister, but a divorcee, was not naturally likely to have any affinity with the Brethren, but he had chided Helen Clark for her moral values, and had unexpectedly voted against gay civil unions in December 2004 (Goldsmith 2005). The Brethren had published

anonymous advertisements against the legislation at that time, describing it as immoral (Hager 2006, 285). Then in April 2005 the Brethren issued a series of newspaper advertisements criticizing the government's defense and nuclear policies. At an expense of \$350,000, they sought to provide a "wake-up call for all New Zealanders" (Hager 2006, 20–1). Hager has reproduced a fascinating email sent to Don Brash and John Key (also a National politician and successor to Brash) on 24 May 2005 in which Ron Hickmott indicates that he and Doug Watt had met with Stephen Joyce (senior National party MP), and now wanted to use seven brochures to raise support for National from younger voters and had \$1 million dollars to fund this (Hager 2006, 332).

Secret discussions with National officials and party leaders commenced soon after this. Their coyness in the brochures about specifically urging people to vote National seems to have been based on advice Ron Hickmott sought on 8 June 2005 from the Chief Electoral Officer, David Henry. Describing himself and his colleagues as a group of "Christian businessmen concerned as to the course and direction of the current [government]," he explained that they had a budget of \$1.2 million with the goal of "Getting party votes for National." They wanted to know how they could help and asking clarification that "anything we do does not *compromise National's funding position*" (their emphasis). They wanted to know how far they could directly assist National candidates (Young 2007). This seems to have been the backdrop for the discussion, although Hager's claim that National suggested the content and format of the brochures seems to be contradicted by the earlier Tasmanian use of the same arguments. The fact is that the Brethren saw the election of National as their key goal.

The more disturbing side of the campaign was the personal attack on Labour members. This continued after the National defeat in the 2005 election. Brethren involvement persisted, and they seem to have commissioned a search for "dirt" on Labour members, including on the Prime Minister, Helen Clark, and her husband, Peter Davis. In September 2006, a Brethren member, Philip Hayward, made allegations about Davis, hinting obliquely about references made in *Investigate Magazine*, a right-wing publication. These seemed to be implying that Davis was gay and had been in trouble with the law in foreign jurisdictions (Kay and Small 2006). TV1's Sunday program had alleged that private detectives were trailing various Labour members (*Press*, 26.9.2006; *Sunday Star-Times*, 1.10.2006; *Southland Times*, 21.9.2006). This awakened Ms Clark's fury, and

it shocked Don Brash into cutting ties with the Brethren and urging National MPs to do the same.

The argument of Nicky Hager's *The Hollow Men* did not focus on the Exclusive Brethren, even though it featured their involvement. Its focus was on the National Party and its determination to use whatever means it took to win power in the 2005 election. Hager argues that it dressed up a very right-wing politician into the guise of a moderate and open politician in order to gain power against Helen Clark's Labour Government, which had a strong sense of purpose shaped by her emphatic approach to issues.

The Exclusive Brethren are wheeled out as the classic evidence of this deceitful conduct. Hager makes no real attempt to understand the Exclusive Brethren; indeed, it strengthens his case to present them in a very stereotypical way. This was certainly true of the journalism of the period as well. Partly this was because there was a real change in Exclusive Brethren behavior after 2002, although not a change in their outlook. It is easy to demonstrate that behind the view that politics is not an activity for Christians to engage in, Brethren are very uniformly shaped by their small service businesses, which almost by definition resist government regulation and interference. The first step which occurred under John S. Hales, was to identify God's purposes with a particular political outcome. Under Bruce Hales, the change was to act smartly and surefootedly on this, and to seek to get some returns from this. The huge backfire to Brethren engagement took the Brethren by surprise. Earlier political engagements had largely passed under the radar, or been the subject of only passing comment. Brethren had not understood the suspicion of New Zealanders towards them. They had not understood how ridiculous their stance looked, since they were so committed to politics yet not prepared to vote. It seemed to most people the essence of abuse of democratic values. This hostility was a dire discovery for the Brethren, although any knowledgeable critics should have known that they held little faith in democracy.

Brash decided after the public outcry to cut links with the Brethren. But the evidence produced by Nicky Hager strongly implicated him in knowing and valuing Exclusive Brethren assistance. Brash's emails were leaked to Nicky Hager presumably by a National insider annoyed at what had occurred, and he was able in *The Hollow Men* to show the extent of discussions that had gone on between Brash and the Brethren, despite denials at the time. In the end, this mis-

judgement helped in the alienation of Brash from the National Party, for they believed that the Brethren links cost them the election victory they deserved.

Conclusion

The Exclusive Brethren have continued their modest but steady growth in New Zealand (largely through biological growth) in the years since 2005. There have been several more public controversies. But political parties are now very wary of their offers of assistance, and they have had to find other ways to achieve their ends. There is no evidence that they have backed away from political concerns, however, where those politics have suited their broader purposes. In essence their goals are not religious as such, but rather the protection of their community and its independence.

They are, however, much more conscious since 2005 that their public reputation is a problem. A striking feature of recent Plymouth Brethren has been a search for public acceptance. After the Christchurch earthquake on 22 February 2011, Doug and Campbell Watt of OMC Power Equipment responded to the need by rushing concrete cutters to the emergency teams at the destroyed CTV Building. They then called upon fellow Exclusive Brethren throughout the country to provide meals to the emergency workers at Latimer Square for the next nine days, supplying some 2,000 meals a day (Parsons 2014, 25). Perhaps this was an important step towards the formation of the Rapid Response Teams (RRT) in 2013. RRT especially in Australia has been a significant tool to improving their public reputation. They have carefully made their support for good causes known, and been happy to receive some public attention, recognizing that this may in fact be good for the community (Knowles 2020). A named New Zealand Board chaired by Cameron Prestidge also includes Eddie Davis from the Rangitikei, Dael Steele, a horticulturalist in Auckland, Danny Blampied of Northland, Jeff Wearmouth of Kaipara, Matthew Smith of the Hawkes Bay, Milton How (who is “highly skilled in IT and technology,”) Kingsley Smith of Timaru and Ronnie Malcolm of Nelson, and they make much of public and government support (RRT 2020).

The 2005 events doubtless were a warning for the Brethren. In some ways, they confirmed the Brethren on a cautiously more open approach to the world around them. They remain, however, fundamentally separatists.

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Note: Information from daily newspapers is indicated in the text with the date when it was published, but not included in these references, except for some major articles referenced under the name of their authors.

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