



SENATE
REPORT

Committee of Privileges

Persons referred to in the Senate

Certain persons on behalf of the
Exclusive Brethren Christian Fellowship

135th Report

September 2008

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Report

1. On 16 September 2008 the President of the Senate, Senator the Hon. John Hogg, received a submission on behalf of the Exclusive Brethren Christian Fellowship from Messrs Doug Burgess, Daniel Hales, Bruce Pridham and David Stewart seeking redress under the resolution of the Senate of 25 February 1988 relating to the protection of persons referred to in the Senate (Privilege Resolution 5).

2. The submission referred to comments made by Senators Bob Brown and Christine Milne in the Senate on 26, 27 and 28 August 2008. The President, having accepted the submission as a submission for the purposes of the resolution, referred it to the Committee of Privileges on 17 September 2008.

3. The committee met in private session on 18 September 2008 and, pursuant to paragraph (3) of Privilege Resolution 5, decided to consider the submission, minus an annexure which it decided to consider separately. Otherwise, the committee resolved to recommend that the response be incorporated in Hansard without change. In considering the submission, the committee did not find it necessary to confer with the persons making the submission or with the senators concerned.

4. The committee draws attention to paragraph (6) of the resolution which requires that, in considering a submission under this resolution and reporting to the Senate, the committee shall not consider or judge the truth of any statements made in the Senate or of the submission.

5. The committee **recommends:**

That a response by Mr Doug Burgess, Mr Daniel Hales, Mr Bruce Pridham and Mr David Stewart on behalf of the Exclusive Brethren Christian Fellowship in the terms specified at Appendix One, be incorporated in *Hansard*.

George Brandis
Chair

Appendix One

Response by Mr Doug Burgess, Mr Daniel Hales, Mr Bruce Pridham and Mr David Stewart on behalf of the Exclusive Brethren Christian Fellowship Pursuant to Resolution 5(7)(b) of the Senate of 25 February 1988

We make this submission to you as members of the Christian church known as the Exclusive Brethren [the "Brethren"] and on its behalf, using the opportunity afforded under Parliamentary Privileges Resolutions agreed to by the Senate on 25 February 1988 which provide for a right of reply when persons have been adversely mentioned in the Senate in such a way to be readily identified.

On 15 May 2008, Senator Bob Brown gave notice of his intention to move a motion on 26 August 2008 that matters relating to the Exclusive Brethren be referred to the Community Affairs Committee. Twice previously, on 9 May 2006 and 7 February 2007, Senator Bob Brown gave notice of similar motions. The allegations in the motion on 9 May 2006 were answered in the Committee of Privileges' 127th Report. In this submission we respond to the false and ill-informed hostile assertions made by Senators Bob Brown and Christine Milne in their Senate speeches on 26, 27 and 28 August 2008 concerning the Brethren.

Contrary to the false and erroneous and ill-informed statements made by the Senators, the truth is as follows:

Marriage is not arranged in the Brethren. Marriage is only entered into by couples of their own free will and choice without any third party interference or direction. Married women can and do work, as they determine, in support of their family. Their skills and expertise are highly valued both inside and outside their families. Wives are often active and paid partners, directors and secretaries in business enterprises with their families and other business people.

Persons that leave the church are not abandoned. Leaving is regarded as a tragedy, and to the extent that these former members will allow, are sympathetically followed up by church elders, relatives and friends and supported wherever possible. Parents and others are encouraged to contact their children and vice versa, to provide mutual, physical, spiritual, financial and pastoral care and support.

Brethren have never interfered in proceedings before the Family Court and have not approached presiding judges at any time. Submissions to the Chief Justice of the Family Court were made on two occasions in 1991. These submissions did not relate to specific or current proceedings before the Family Court.

Schools and businesses established by members of the Brethren source their computers direct from commercial suppliers. Mr Bruce Hales has not had any part or involvement in these transactions whatsoever. Further, he has no direct or indirect financial involvement in any business or organization in the IT field. Brethren schools provide IT access to their students to enable them to study the Board of Studies curriculum, as do all non-government schools. Students are not prevented from going on to further education. Manual Arts subjects are available to and studied by girls and boys alike. All Brethren schools, including Glenvale, use government funding to pay teachers salaries. No government funds have been channeled from Glenvale school to ProVision, nor has ProVision at any time benefited financially from Glenvale school.

Wilmac has never made any donation to the Liberal Party whatsoever. Wilmac lodged a return to the AEC as required and no further action has been initiated by any other party.

The "Peebs net" website has been set up by dissidents who have left the church and is designed to influence the general public against the church and bring it into disrepute. Many of the contributors to this website are included amongst those who as stated below, have had no contact with the church for up to forty years and some have never been members of the Brethren fellowship. Brethren, and those who have left the church, have always since birth interacted with society, including education, employment and many other commercial and financial transactions. Social fellowship is voluntarily limited to involvement with participants of the Lords Supper (Holy Communion) amongst Brethren.

Though always tragic, suicide is a very rare occurrence amongst Brethren and those who have left the church, and is statistically well below national age group figures. The sanctity of life is taught from infancy, and to cast all our cares on the Lord Jesus Christ and have faith in God.

Senators Bob Brown and Milne are relying solely on misinformation about the Brethren gathered from disaffected, bitter ex-brethren who have had no direct contact with the church for up to forty years. This is confirmed by Senator Milne in her Senate speech on 27 August 2008 quoting from someone who left the church about 20 years ago. Senator Bob Brown is very ill-informed about the Brethren, and has not replied to a written offer of 8 March 2007 to meet the Brethren and have discussions relating to his proposed Senate enquiry.

The gratuitous and hostile attacks by Senators Bob Brown and Christine Milne go further than just the Brethren. In maligning Brethren schools, they also denigrate the more than 350 non Brethren teachers and staff employed across Australia who are personally committed to providing a high standard of education for these students. Such accusations directly impinge on the professionalism of these dedicated people who are part of our Australian community. These staff ensure that the State's curriculum is taught in accordance with all the educational standards and requirements.

Additionally, the state regulatory authorities are maligned. Without exception each State education authority has registered Brethren schools in their State, have carried out regular inspections, and have maintained their accreditation.

In conclusion, the speeches by Senators Bob Brown and Christine Milne contain many more inaccurate, misleading and false allegations concerning the Brethren church, schools and members which could be contested, however what has been outlined above is sufficient to substantiate that this is an extraordinarily erroneous, ill-informed and unwarranted attack on the Brethren, their church, members and families without due cause or just reason.

We humbly request that you consider the above with a view to incorporating our response in Hansard in order to preserve the integrity and respect of some 15,000 citizens of this country who have been grossly denigrated and misrepresented in the Australian Senate by the hostile statements made by both Senators Bob Brown and Christine Milne.

(Signed)

Doug Burgess

Daniel Hales

Bruce Pridham

David Stewart