

The Senate

Committee of Privileges

Persons referred to in the Senate

Mr Anthony and Mrs Brenda Bird, members of the
Exclusive Brethren

137th Report

February 2009

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ISBN 978-1-74229-036-2

This document was produced by the Committee of Privileges, and printed by the Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, Canberra

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The Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Telephone: (02) 6277 3360
Facsimile: (02) 6277 3199
E-mail: Priv.sen@aph.gov.au
Internet: http://www.aph.gov.au/senate_privileges

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 Messers Doug Burgess, Daniel Hales, Bruce Pridham and David Stewart seeking redress under the resolution of the Senate of 25th February 1988 relating to the protection of persons referred to in the Senate (Privilege Resolution 5). The committee dealt with this matter in its *135th Report*, tabled and adopted on 24 September 2008. Enclosed with that submission was a separate letter, dated 8 September 2008, from Mrs Brenda Bird, referred to in the *135th Report* as an annexure.

2. Mrs Bird's letter also referred to comments made by Senators Bob Brown and Christine Milne in the Senate on 26, 27 and 28 August 2008. The committee resolved to clarify Mrs Bird's intentions and wrote to her on 24 September 2008. The committee received confirmation on 4 December 2008 that Mrs Bird was also seeking redress under Resolution 5 for comments by Senator Milne which, although not identifying her by name, aggrieved her and her husband as members of the Exclusive Brethren. Mrs Bird provided a revised submission from herself and her husband, Mr Anthony Bird. Unfortunately the submission was received too late to be considered by the committee before the Senate adjourned for the summer recess.

3. The committee met in private session on 5 February 2009 and, pursuant to paragraph (3) of Privilege Resolution 5, decided to consider the submission. The response, which the committee now recommends for incorporation in *Hansard*, has been agreed to by Mr and Mrs Bird and the committee in accordance with Resolution 5(7)(b).

4. The committee draws attention to paragraph 5(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. The committee recognised Mrs Bird's conviction that she would be identified in the small community in which she lives. While accepting that this is an appropriate case for redress, the committee notes that its interpretation of the requirement in Resolution 5 for persons to be referred to "in such a way as to be readily identified" has been generous and is unlikely to be extended further in future cases.

5. The committee **recommends:**

That a response by Mr and Mrs Bird, in the terms specified at Appendix One, be incorporated in *Hansard*.

George Brandis
Chair

APPENDIX ONE

RESPONSE BY MR & MRS A BIRD, PURSUANT TO RESOLUTION 5(7)(b) OF THE SENATE OF 25 FEBRUARY 1988

We write as aggrieved members of the Exclusive Brethren in relation to comments made on Tuesday 26 August 2008, at approx 5:57 PM, by Senator Christine Milne from Tasmania to the Senate generally on the subject of making an inquiry into certain matters relating to our Church.

In her address, Senator Milne stated: When I taught at Devonport High School back in the early 1980's at that stage there were no Exclusive Brethren schools as such and some of the students came to Devonport High. I had a particularly bright young woman in my class, and I urged her to go on to Don College ..."

As Brenda came from Devonport and attended Devonport High School at around the time referred to, she is quite familiar with the persons referred to by Mrs Christine Milne.

We wish to address the statements made by Senator Milne in her address:

(i) Senator Milne commented that girls are not allowed to do manual arts subjects. This is totally inaccurate. It was a requirement for all students to undertake woodwork, metalwork & technical drawing at this school. We are not aware of any exemption granted.

(ii) Senator Milne stated that students would not be going on to further education. As no further years were offered past Year 10 at Devonport High School, it was necessary to attend another College for further study, which many persons did, Exclusive Brethren members included.

(iii) Senator Milne stated that our marriages are arranged. This was certainly not the case for every couple that we have ever known in the Church, and was certainly not the case for ourselves. We first met through social contact and from this contact our relationship developed completely on our own initiative and commitment.

(iv) Senator Milne commented that within the Church married women are precluded from working. This is not so, we are aware of many married female persons in the workforce from our Church.

We feel that Senator Milne has maligned the members of the Exclusive Brethren Church.

Her quotations are incorrect and they display her obvious dislike for what our organisation stands for. She has taken her inaccurate memories and assumptions from one student to brand our whole Church as being a ruthless, illegal sect. This is certainly not the accurate, fair or unbiased outlook that we expect to see from members of the Australian Government.

As we greatly respect the Australian Parliamentary system and all that it stands for, we feel that it is only right that a balanced account should be on record of what the facts actually were in the years that Senator Milne refers to in her address.

(signed)

Anthony & Brenda Bird