Speech by

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PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING BILL
REGULATION OF RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN EMBRYOS AND ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY BILL

Mr MICKEL (Logan—ALP) (1.11 a.m.): I support the bill to outlaw the cloning of human beings. It is the second bill I have struggled with. The media commentary has referred to members who have concerns about aspects of these bills as being dissidents or as part of a backbench revolt. It is this type of commentary which undermines mature public debate of serious issues in this country, because it quickly deteriorates into winners and losers rather than an analysis of how people are arriving at their decisions. On the one hand, people want members of parliament to weigh up the issues and they are condemned when they are seen not to. On the other, weighing up issues, even on conscience matters, is depicted as disunity. I cannot see that it weakens the media to report that people analysed an issue and came to different conclusions on what are highly complex ethical issues.

The research involving human embryos bill is an ethical issue for me, and I will explain why. I recognise that it is complementary legislation with the national parliament and other states. I accept, too, that for the first time in this state we will have regulations governing embryonic research. Lack of regulation is the grave weakness with the current laws with respect to IVF—a program that has delivered nationwide in excess of 70,000 surplus embryos and a procedure that still fails the majority of participants.

It was instructive to return to the report prepared by scientists and ethicists who advised the then Queensland government decades ago on IVF. One of those people was Professor Alan Trounson, whom I will return to later in this contribution. The recommendations of that inquiry were that the embryos were not to be the subject of experimentation. Yet here we are decades later proposing legislation to carry out experiments on embryos in direct contravention of that recommendation.

I am therefore a subscriber to the slippery slope argument in science, and I have good reason to be concerned. Scientists with the research dollars of major corporations at their back will always push the boundaries, and this debate is no exception. Let me explain why. In a submission to the federal parliamentary committee inquiring into cloning and stem cell research Professor Trounson said—

If we want to derive four new lines of embryonic stem cells we would theoretically use eight embryos and we would not really want to use any more ever again. We would have enough cells there to supply all the research institutes in Australia and probably world wide.

After making that statement, the scientists then convinced the Council of Australian Governments of the need for experimentation on excess embryos. After COAG set down a date of 5 April 2000 for the collection of embryos, scientists then insisted that specially creating embryos for destructive research should not be prohibited. So they have shifted the goal posts every time an issue has been settled.

If we are looking for intellectual honesty in this debate from the scientists, then we can forget it. We had Professor Trounson's fraudulent rat video showing that crippled rats could walk after being injected with embryonic stem cells—completely and fraudulently misleading.

We have heard in this debate about the research promise of embryonic stem cell research. It is a bit like the news on a Sunday night when the pharmaceutical companies can usually convince the journalist desperate for news that this week, above all other weeks, there is the potential to cure cancer or multiple sclerosis. It is the same with the use of human embryos. Scientists have experimented with mice embryonic stem cells for years and human embryonic stem cells for a number of years. What are

the results? All they can point to is a potential benefit. Therapies using human embryonic stem cells have cured no-one. This has been backed by the Washington National Academy of Sciences as recently as June 2001, when it said—

These cells have never helped a human patient.

The debate has turned on what I call the Peter Pan debate—the hope for eternal youth via the hope for eternal cures. Hold out the promise of a cure for a sick person and then pressure the government to provide the funds to companies to find the cure. That is precisely what the Howard government did with the company associated with that great snake oil salesman Professor Alan Trounson.

However, there are worrying trends with the research. One is the malignant potential of embryonic stem cells. As *Science* magazine stated, ES cells have plenty of limitations, too. For one, murine ES cells have a disturbing ability to form tumours, and researchers are not sure how to counteract that. Researchers have found difficulty in establishing and maintaining embryonic stem cell lines. Doug Melton, a Harvard University researcher, quoted in an article headed 'Stem cell decision examined', said—

In my view human embryonic stem cell properties will degrade with time. Everyone is fearful that the more you grow them in a dish the more they lose their properties.

There is another issue, and that is the issue of tissue rejection. With embryonic stem cell research the risk of tissue rejection can be entirely removed by one way, and that is with therapeutic cloning. But therapeutic cloning carries its own moral complications. Whilst tonight we might say we are opposed to cloning, let me give the House this assurance: in the time of this parliament or the next parliament therapeutic cloning will be the next great pressure point on government from the scientific community.

So what then are the alternatives to embryonic stem cells? There are the cells that are already producing medical breakthroughs without the ethical dilemmas that accompany human embryonic stem cells. They are adult stem cells. Why destroy embryos for research purposes when we have abundant supplies of human adult cells? Adult stem cells come from children as well as adults. Another rich source of cells for research remains in the umbilical cord, taken from the blood of the cord after the birth of a child. Private US funding of stem cell research is nearly all directed into adult stem cells, where the results have been promising.

Of the 15 companies that do stem cell research, 13 work on adult stem cells. The successes of adult stem cell research have been extraordinary. An 18-year-old paraplegic patient with a severed spinal cord has been treated in Canada with her own immune cells and has regained bladder control and movement of her toes.

Scientists at Harvard Medical School have turned human pancreatic ductal cells into cells that produce insulin, promising hope for diabetics. According to experts writing in *Science* magazine February 2000, bone marrow stem cells appear to be very versatile, forming brain and muscle cells and liver cell precursors. US doctors have taken adult stem cells from the brain of a patient with Parkinson's disease and reimplanted them, resulting in an 83 per cent improvement in the patient.

Washington Medical Centre treated 26 patients with rapidly deteriorating multiple sclerosis. Twenty patients stabilised and six improved following treatment with adult stem cells. Lest members think I am confining this to overseas, there are promising Smart State things happening here in Queensland. I refer them to the ear, nose and throat specialist Dr Chris Perry, who had excellent results with nasal stem cells. There is also work being done in Newcastle, all very promising, all in need of research and, as I said, all with the ability to create jobs here in Australia without the ethical dilemmas posed by the embryonic stem cell research.

Finally, in this House we have been offered a conscience vote because of the ethical dilemmas that have been raised, but let me pose this question to the House: what of the scientists who have to work in the laboratories? Does this legislation guarantee them a conscience vote? Does it guarantee them a conscience decision in their workplace if in all consciousness they cannot carry out research into human embryos? There was nothing in the bill, nothing in the explanatory notes, that reassured me about this. I would find it strange that as legislators we have a conscience vote whilst the employees will be subject to the conscience of the research companies who are seeking research funding. I would seek some reassurance for the work force on this issue.

My comments are simply this: I will oppose the research involving human embryonic research for the reasons that I have outlined