



Speech by

Liz Cunningham

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

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RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN EMBRYOS AND PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—Ind) (3.30 pm): I rise to speak in opposition to the Research Involving Human Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Amendment Bill, but I acknowledge that this issue is one that is both emotive and divisive. I acknowledge that overwhelmingly those contributing to this debate have been measured in their language and have recognised the sensitivity of the personal decision making behind each contribution.

In the time this matter has been in the public arena, I have received many letters expressing opposition to this proposal but very few, if any, in terms of support. Overwhelmingly, the debate in favour of human embryonic cloning centres on the probable achievements of embryonic stem cell research. Only three years ago or thereabouts we were debating the use of unwanted, as they were called, embryos which were kept for IVF. It is tragic that any little baby is unwanted irrespective of their age. To use them as research fodder was to me and many others untenable. That bill passed on the numbers, but it was claimed that this would not open the door to further use of human embryos and especially cloning, yet here we are today.

There have been speakers on this bill who have said that this could not lead to the blending of human and animal embryos or hybrid embryos for research purposes. Tragically, that is exactly what is being considered in Britain. An article in September this year stated—

The creation of part-human, part-animal embryos appears set to be approved by Britain's fertility regulator today.

These "hybrid" embryos would be used for research into incurable diseases such as Alzheimer's.

The reports are after a surprise decision by the British Government not to ban the controversial research.

A shortage of human eggs has led two groups of scientists to appeal to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority for permission to make hybrid embryos from human skin cells and animal eggs.

Cows' eggs are most likely to be used, because they are plentiful.

Much expectation was created with the passing of the legislation in 2003 about miracle cures and the like. The long time lines were also acknowledged. Yet as late as July this year the following information was released, and I quote from an article by Tess Livingstone—

Embryonic stem cell research has suffered a major blow with a major Singaporean-Australian company abandoning work on therapies due to lack of success and soaring costs.

She went on to say—

... ESI is "halting work on human embryonic stem cell therapies" as investors had lost interest because "the likelihood of having products in the clinic in the short term was vanishingly small" ...

...

But making well-functioning, insulin-producing cells "proved really difficult", Professor Colman said, as both therapies would have needed at least a billion cells for each dose and producing them at such numbers was prohibitively expensive.

Australia's leading adult stem cell scientist, Professor Alan Mackay-Sim, director of the National Centre for Adult Stem Cell Research at Griffith University, said he was not surprised.

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Professor Mackay-Sim's team can produce 20 million adult stem cells in four weeks using olfactory stem cells taken from the adult nose.

There are very real issues to consider if one considers the possible achievements of medical research on embryos, however remote. Would I like to see the end of suffering? Of course. Would I like to see a cure for cancer? Absolutely. My dad died from lung and liver cancer as well as secondaries. His death was unexpected and sudden. Like many here, I have relatives who have suffered from a range of debilitating diseases. Often quoted in this debate is Alzheimer's and I guess its close cousin dementia, and they are cruel diseases. They thieve the person we know and love and leave a disorientated and unrecognising person. Those who love the sufferer must say goodbye at least twice—once when the sufferer disappears into a cocoon of confusion and bewilderment and the second time when their physical frailty finally gives way to death.

No-one I know would ever wish to see a loved one, indeed anyone, suffer unnecessarily but our consideration must go beyond wants and desires. Our consideration must also be made within the context of the inestimable value of human life. Many successes have been achieved using adult stem cells less malleable than embryonic stem cells but much more predictive, and I fully support the continuation of that research and work.

A speaker yesterday in support of this legislation stated that this is not simply the sanctity of life argument, but I have to say for me at least this is exactly about the sanctity of life. This debate is not for me theoretical in terms of when we believe life begins or whether an embryo of 14 days is suitable for experimentation and destruction. Those arguing in favour of this legislation have cited the possible opportunities embryonic stem cell experimentation may bring for people with illness or disability. Many here on either side of the debate have opened their hearts and their lives to this parliament and to the community, with information of family and friends who have faced significant illness or disability and their wish for a future cure.

I can remember some years ago now when great hope was held out in relation to amputated limbs being regrown. As a daughter and sister to three amputees, can I say that prediction has been a long time in coming to realisation. Yes, there have been amazing achievements in bionic technology for limb control and movement, but other than some reattachment of severed fingers and a forearm through microsurgery, we wait for the realisation of those optimistic predictions. I acknowledge they may come, but I believe that realisation must be done ethically.

The member for Southern Downs mentioned the concerns held by members of the Women's Forum Australia. I would like to put on the record an abstract from a paper by Katrina George to further the Women's Forum Australia point of view. She stated—

As more and more countries open their doors to human cloning and embryonic stem cell research, scientists will be confronted with one fundamental problem: where will all the eggs come from? The mass harvesting of eggs raises serious issues about women's health, status and well-being. This paper critically examines proposals for ova supply such as altruistic donation, surplus IVF eggs and commercial sale. It questions the meaningfulness of informed consent and the risk-benefit ratio in a climate where powerful economic and social forces increasingly view the risks to women as the necessary trade-off for scientific advance.

It is unclear where the eggs will be collected from for embryo development and cloning. Will they come from donors who fully support the research? Will they come from hyperstimulated ovaries of women with varying levels of understanding of the medical implications to them of the process? Will these eggs be collected from late-term babies who either die in utero or are the tragic victims of late-term abortions? It really is not clear. The Family Council of Queensland stated—

We oppose human cloning and embryonic stem cell research, because it is immoral to create human life with its destruction intended. It is unethical to destroy innocent human life, even for medical research. Quite clearly, the embryo is human (with 46 chromosomes)—not animal or vegetable—and is growing and multiplying and is therefore alive. Embryo, foetus, infant, child, adolescent, adult and geriatric are all just descriptions of human life at various stages of development. The human embryo is not a potential person but, rather a unique and irreplaceable person with potential, requiring only nutrition, oxygen and shelter to develop into someone like you or me.

A child is the greatest gift to a couple. The amazing journey in the womb and in early life remains an inestimable joy to most parents. I cannot support the use of embryos for research and destruction as they are recognised only as disposable commodities. Embryos, if allowed to achieve their rightful potential, would contribute to our futures in miraculous and exciting ways. These embryos are, in my ethical and faith walk, unique, vulnerable and infinitely valuable babies from conception, and on that basis I cannot support the legislation.