



Speech by

Peter Lawlor

MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT

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RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN EMBRYOS AND PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LAWLOR (Southport—ALP) (7.47 pm): I support this bill and I will endeavour to explain why. However, I know that I will not be as eloquent or as logical as many of the speakers who have preceded me, both for and against the bill. I think I should say, when asked why I supported the bill, 'Just read John-Paul Langbroek's speech.' I really do not think that I can put it any better than he did. But I will do my best and certainly I will approach this issue with no less sincerity than all the other members here.

As mentioned by the minister for transport, John Mickel, whether we are for or against this bill I accept that all views are held sincerely. Genuine people such as are in this chamber can examine the same issue and come to different conclusions. Many friends in this chamber I disagree with on this particular bill and similarly people whom I would not normally agree with I find that I am in agreement with. I am making my comments following a lengthy examination of the issues and my conscience and no comment I make should be construed as any personal criticism of other speakers or indeed any member's decision.

The bill amends the Research Involving Human Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2003 to mirror the recent amendments to the Commonwealth Research Involving Human Embryos Act and the Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2002. The bill gives effect to the undertaking by all the states and the Australian Capital Territory to the Council of Australian Governments' meeting on 13 April 2007 to introduce corresponding legislation into their respective parliaments to maintain a national approach to regulating human embryo research and cloning. Similar legislation has already been passed by the federal parliament and the Victorian and New South Wales parliaments. Even from the point of consistency, I believe that it is desirable that we do the same—although that is probably fairly low on the list of considerations as to why I think this legislation should be agreed to.

The amendments arise from recommendations of the Legislation Review Committee chaired by the late Hon. John Lockhart, a former justice of the Federal Court. The committee comprised highly qualified and experienced members from the fields of law, science, medicine and ethics and all state and territory governments were consulted on the composition of the committee. The review committee undertook an extensive review of the Commonwealth acts, consulting widely with the community and with state and territory governments. Ethicists, scientists, IVF specialists, religious leaders and the community were all invited to make submissions and the committee met individually with many leading experts. The committee carefully weighed the ethical and moral concerns raised during consultation with the strong community support for research that has the potential to help people with debilitating or currently incurable conditions.

Because of time constraints I will not go into the technical detail of the bill which has been so adequately and thoroughly dealt with by other speakers. This legislation gives the possibility that research might find cures and treatment which could benefit many thousands of Australians whose lives are shortened or made painful by diseases and injuries such as juvenile diabetes, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, liver and other organ failure, a variety of cancers, spinal cord injury, inherited conditions such as cystic fibrosis and nerve cell damage caused by stroke and heart disease.

As with many of the previous speakers, I have a personal interest in this legislation. My younger brother was born with cystic fibrosis. Any research is not likely to benefit him but certainly people that come afterwards one would hope would benefit from such research. Also another brother, Phillip, was born with an inherited condition which he did not even know he had. No research is going to help him. He died when he was 25 from that condition. He was actually a Christian Brother which is a bit ironic considering that many people in the Catholic Church are against this sort of legislation.

I have mentioned in previous speeches here how the attitudes, standards and expectations of the community can change. It was in about 1970 when the first heart transplant was performed by Dr Christian Barnard in Cape Town. At that time there was quite a furore about the procedure and a lot of moral debate and proclamations from various religious groups as to whether it was appropriate. Now, of course, transplants of various organs are quite commonplace. Similarly, the IVF program caused quite a controversy when it first occurred. I gave an example in this place which is just another example of how even people in the Catholic Church can disagree. A couple of friends of mine went through the IVF program and their most enthusiastic supporters were two Catholic nuns. They prayed fervently that the IVF program would be successful and celebrated when the wife actually fell pregnant and similarly celebrated when the baby, a little girl, was born. She is now about 16 or 17 and is an absolute joy to her parents and all who know her. Those two nuns were praying for a result that was actually contrary to the official line of the Catholic Church.

People here are quoting religious points of view to support their arguments. I accept that they are entitled to do that. It is the church in particular, of all organisations, that should not be quoted. It has an absolutely appalling record when it comes to issues of scientific discovery. The most obvious example of that—there are quite a few—relates to the Catholic Church, probably because it has been around for longer than most of them, and how Galileo was treated. In 1632 Galileo published *Dialog on the Two Chief World Systems—Ptolemaic and Copernican*. In 1633 Galileo stood trial for heresy. The charge was brought by the Holy Office of the Inquisition and his book, the *Dialog*, was prohibited. On 8 January 1642 Galileo died. Just to put Galileo's death into context, Isaac Newton was born on 25 December of that same year.

In 1822 the Holy Office permitted publication of books that taught earth's motion. In 1835 Galileo's *Dialog* was dropped from the Index of Prohibited Books almost 200 years after it was printed. In 1979 Pope John Paul called for theologians, scholars and historians to re-examine Galileo's case. In 1992 Pope John Paul publicly endorsed Galileo's philosophy noting 'how intelligibility attested to by the marvellous discoveries of science and technology leads us in the last analysis to the transcendent and primordial thought imprinted on all things'. The Holy Office of the Inquisition was a committee of 10 cardinals appointed by Pope Urban VIII. He rejected various pleas for a pardon and as a result Galileo was subject to house arrest, humiliation and persecution for the rest of his life.

It may be argued that this legislation is not only a matter of science; it is also a matter of morals and ethics. For that reason it is most appropriate that this bill be the subject of a conscience vote, as it is. The point of mentioning the tragic circumstances of Galileo, a pious man whose two daughters were nuns and who was certainly no rebel, is simply to show that a proclamation on a matter of faith—that is, that the earth was the centre of the universe—a belief for which the Catholic Church condemned Galileo as a heretic—he believed, of course, that the centre of the universe was the sun—was changed and Galileo was exonerated. This is in 1992. A fat lot of good it did him 359 years later for the church to finally come to the conclusion that Galileo was correct.

Mr Rickuss: It got him out of purgatory though, didn't it?

Mr LAWLOR: I don't think they believe in purgatory anymore, but that is another story. We will not get into that.

Mr Rickuss: They got rid of purgatory, too?

Mr LAWLOR: Yes, we have banned that as well. That was on an issue that was scientifically provable. How much harder is it to be correct on an ethical or essentially moral issue in relation to which there is no absolute right or wrong. So long as every member has thoroughly examined their conscience, and I know that they have, then everyone is correct, whatever different conclusion we come to. Whilst some people are relying on advice from priests and religious people and so on, Fr Bob McGuire, a Catholic priest of St Peter and Paul Church in South Melbourne, on crikey.com of 10 August, made a few comments on the lobbying in relation to the federal legislation by the Australian Christian Lobby and also Hillsong and organisations such as that. Amongst other things he stated—

They're preaching for those at the top end of town, it's not about the little guy...but it's not really your traditional Jesus of Nazareth going about his humble business giving the voiceless a voice ... I'd like the Christian lobby to be converted to Jesus of Nazareth ... Jesus of Nazareth was all about self sacrifice.

And there's not much of that around anymore. He goes on—

Politicians should go and research facts and issues as Citizen Kane, not as a Buddhist or a Roman Catholic. You're in Parliament as an Australian. They don't want to hear you spouting Roman Catholic, they want you to spout—

In this case Queensland—

as representatives of the people.

He goes on—

Politicians are making their living out of the trust that people have put in them, to act on behalf of—

Queenslanders—

not God, or the church, or anyone else.

The member for Southern Downs, who I have a great deal of respect for, said that in a few years time we will be back here debating a further advance in relation to cloning and/or stem cell research. So what? As the member for Kallangur pointed out, that is what we do here. As circumstances change legislation must be updated. What is strange about that? We update transport legislation, education legislation, all manner of legislation. This topic is no different.

The Leader of the Opposition, in an excellent contribution, also raised the issue of the situation when the church and public morals dictated that corpses could not be dissected for the purpose of educating doctors and so on. Where would we be today if the moral attitude and teaching of the church of those times had prevailed? Would we have the life expectancy and health standards of today? This experimentation had to be done in secret, dealing with body snatchers and so on. I think the answer is obvious.

Many members spoke of the fact that the proposed research contemplated by the bill may not produce the hoped for medical cures. Of course that is correct. No research comes with a written guarantee. Perhaps only a fraction of a per cent of all research produces a positive outcome. In my view, that is no reason to abandon research such as is contemplated by this bill. I commend the bill to the House.