



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR NOOSA

Hansard Thursday, 11 October 2007

RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN EMBRYOS AND PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING AMENDMENT BILL

Mr ELMES (Noosa—Lib) (4.40 pm): I would like to begin my contribution on this debate on the Research Involving Human Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Amendment Bill by acknowledging and expressing thanks for the opportunity to debate this bill from a conscience perspective. This bill in effect is a series of judgements about science and ethics and I do not think either can be completely divorced in this debate.

When I was considering my position on this legislation, I could not help but return to the simple fact of the matter—that is, to summarise this bill, we are being asked to support the creation of human embryos in a lab for the purposes of scientific experimentation so long as those embryos do not live longer than 14 days. Regardless of the jargon assigned to the development of embryos, if they have the capacity to develop into human beings, which stem cell scientists admit, they are life in my opinion. We are therefore being asked to consider destroying life in the name of science.

My concerns with the bill are as follows. First, we are dealing with human life and nothing can escape the fact that, if any of those embryos were in a womb and given a chance, they might turn out to be a human being. Second, we are taking a human life and destroying it in the name of science. Third, there is no absolute promise that the destruction of human life will return the results we hope for. Finally, even if we were to allow ourselves the indulgence of considering man-made embryos purely as genetic material, we are still creating an arbitrary divide between classes of humans—on the one hand, those being grown in a lab for the purposes of scientific destruction and, on the other hand, those which are grown in the womb of a mother.

I will deal with each of my concerns in turn, but let me say at the outset having had the opportunity to read the debates of our colleagues in Canberra and the scientific research which has been presented to me over the last couple of months that this bill essentially comes down to a question of whether the end justifies the means. Should we in the name of scientific advancement allow the sanctity of life, regardless of how it is defined, to be denigrated? My conscience says no. I believe that life is life. In my opinion, merely labelling an embryo as different to a life is nothing but a semantic difference. I do not think the origin of an embryo is relevant to this debate.

If there is the possibility that an embryo will develop into a functioning human being, then there is nothing in my view that divides the two. I believe that we should respect the sanctity of life in all its forms. To create an arbitrary divide between the two is a hazard that we should avoid.

I have thought about the restriction against the development of embryos outside the womb for longer than 14 days. This restriction appears to recognise the inherent danger of fostering life in an artificial setting. I think it goes further because it also means that an embryo at 15 days has more rights than one at 14 days. So where does this arbitrary assignment of rights come from and what gives an extra day more importance? In my opinion, nothing changes after the passing of two weeks and to try to create a

difference between the two implicitly recognises the futility of this entire bill in trying to skirt the ethical issue at hand.

I understand that my opinions will not be universally shared in this place, but I urge all members to consider the implications of this illogical divide between a 14-day-old embryo and a 15-day-old embryo. We would essentially be creating a separate class of life—one that was designed and created by science with the sole purpose of destruction. I cannot see that a responsible member of society would allow such a separation to be made.

Four years ago, this House passed a bill that categorically refused to allow such a divide and the use of man-made embryos for research. Today we consider the authorisation of a 14-day time frame for research. This situation of devaluing human life if done so within a period of time is very dangerous territory. We are essentially sanctioning the scientific experimentation and death of an embryo but limiting it to a period of the embryo's existence. It is of great concern to me that, once we allow the demarcation of life, the time frames could simply be increased. It is a public policy argument that by allowing this arbitrary time frame to become law we are devaluing life and allowing it to be eroded over time. What is a small leak today may well become a flood tomorrow.

This brings me to my second concern—that of using human life for the advancement of science. In a situation where someone voluntarily allows themselves to be the subject of a medical test and gives fully informed consent to that testing, I do not think there is a problem. But we are dealing with a situation where no consent is able to be given. We do not allow parents to donate their children for medical testing, nor do I think it is right for a couple to give their embryos. But this dilemma is compounded where an embryo is created by science for medical testing. Who can give the consent in that situation? Perhaps the donors of the DNA material. Do they have a responsibility to consider the rights of their donated generic material? Perhaps the better question is: do the donors have the capacity to consider the rights of their material, because at the time the genetic material was given to an IVF facility it was for the purposes of in-vitro fertilisation of the mother? If the donors have what they wanted from the procedures, any additional material is therefore left in the unenviable position of being unwanted and liable to be discarded.

In my opinion, this situation of discarded embryos is similar to unwanted children who are abandoned by their parents. In that situation, the state has a duty of care to protect the abandoned children and certainly would not allow those children to become the subject of medical testing. So I think in the situation of abandoned embryos the state should maintain its position to protect the embryos against unethical medical testing, scientific research and ultimately destruction.

In my opinion, any fertilised embryo that has the capacity or potential to develop into a human being is human life. I cannot in good conscience accept the semantic difference that an embryo is not a life simply because it relies on another for that life. I have already shared my concerns on the artificial divide between a 14-day-old embryo and a 15-day-old embryo. The mere difference of the number of cellular divides in my opinion does not give a robust definition of life. To allow this divide to become law may well set in motion the eventual devaluation of all life. It is a slippery slope that we would do very well to avoid.

I pointed out that the state protects abandoned children, which in my opinion is comparable to the circumstances of abandoned embryos. In such circumstances, I believe that the state should protect human life against unethical treatment. But even if we were to consider justifying this bill in the name of science, what are the promised outcomes of this research and are they sufficiently certain to become positively considered?

From my perusal of the research that has been sent to me, I do not think there is more than a whiff of the possibility of scientific advancement. In any event, in my opinion I do not see sufficient promise that would warrant the ethical implications of supporting this bill. My conscience is not outweighed by my impression of the possibilities of scientific advancement in this area. I think the adult stem cell research, particularly under Professor Alan Mackay-Sim at Griffith University, warrants sufficient promise that would render the promises alluded to by the supporters of this bill unnecessary.

My final concern is in relation to the origin of these embryos and the creation of life for research. This House has previously voted to reject the creation of embryos or harvesting of embryos for scientific research. The reasoning behind that was the sanctity of life, but I see that in effect we are saying here that if man is able to create life then such man-made life is second class to that which was organically made. To me, such a proposition is inherently dangerous. Building on my earlier comments, I am concerned that this would present a situation where we could see one day life being created for medical research, body part harvesting or any other number of purposes under the guise that such life is second class. In my opinion, to relegate life into classes with separate rights is dangerous. We in this place have a responsibility to protect life regardless of whether it begins in the womb or a Petri dish. I strongly oppose this bill.