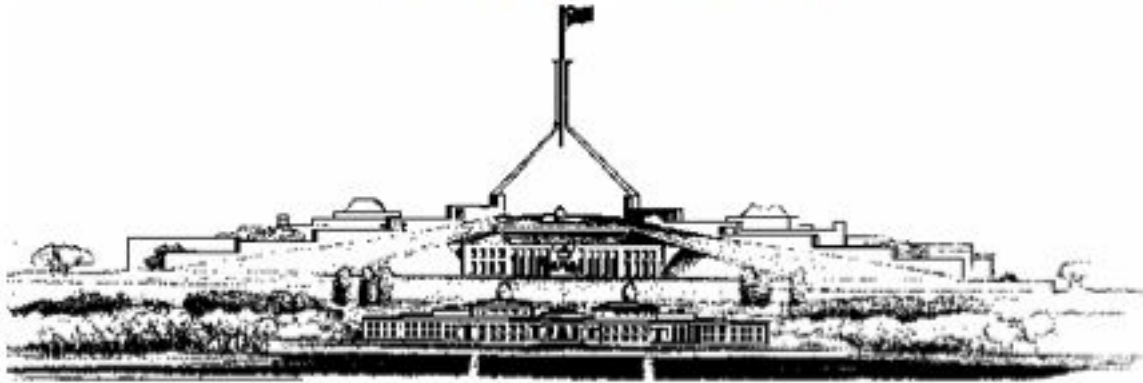




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING
FOR REPRODUCTION AND THE
REGULATION OF HUMAN EMBRYO
RESEARCH AMENDMENT BILL 2006**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 6 December 2006

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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| Speaker Billson, Bruce, MP | Question No. |

Mr BILLSON (Dunkley—Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence) (11.20 am)—The Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction and the Regulation of Human Embryo Research Amendment Bill 2006 before us today is a personal challenge surrounded by strong feelings and, some would say, even controversy. No matter what we finally decide, we need to reflect on our conscience and our motives when we make these decisions on behalf of our community and reflect the best we have to offer in ourselves. It is on that basis that, on balance, I will be supporting this bill.

I support this bill for a range of reasons, many of which stem from the statements I made in 2002 when this matter first came before the parliament. At that time, I had just been on quite a journey with my friend and colleague Kevin Andrews. We were on the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Legal and Constitutional Affairs and we travelled far and wide across the country canvassing these themes and looking at the moral, ethical, regulatory, health and human aspiration virtues and arguments surrounding this whole area of medical research. We travelled far and wide and we heard many points of view and at times the arguments put forward were quite irreconcilable. The basis on which they had been developed was for some drawn from their faith or strong convictions and for others more of a utilitarian view of the good that could come out of this work if it was supported and regulated properly to guard against excesses.

My strong support for the earlier legislation is clear, and the reasons for it I will not go over other than to say that at times in some of my work I was partnered by Con Sciacca. We were not quite the odd couple but an unexpected alliance. We moved the measures to split the legislation. At that time my strong view was that there was almost a contradiction of conscience embedded in the one bill and that people should be given an opportunity not only to vote against the notion of human cloning but to vote equally thoughtfully on the other element, which was stem cell research. That was achieved, we had the passage of the bill and then it was reassembled and became the legislation that we are seeking to amend today.

I do not see this debate as a contest between the virtues and the possibilities of different forms of research. I am optimistic every day that new insights will be gained from a whole range of human endeavour and enterprise, whether it be adult stem cell research, embryonic stem cell research or the other kinds of medical research that go on every day in this country and in other parts of the world. I am interested in what it is trying to achieve and whether there are safeguards against excesses or a rampant enterprise in research which loses focus and which moves away from healing and life giving into something else. This is why I am supportive of Senator Patterson's amendments, and I commend her for her work.

Many of the debates that we have had in this place reflect on the earlier discussion, but for me the safeguards embedded in the bill we are discussing mean that it is within our reach to carry out embryonic stem cell research in a safe and thoughtful way. The insights that it may offer, the remedies and therapies that it may produce and the benefit that it offers to all humankind deserve the possibility and the opportunity, and we should, within certain boundaries and certain constraints, support that work.

There have been discussions around the time limit of 14 days, there have been discussions around the use of an egg, there have been discussions around somatic stem cells and there have been discussions around inputs or steps along the way to conception and the creation of a new being. Some of the arguments have centred on a view that if you have elements of that process then that amounts to the total outcome: a conscious, functioning being with a whole world of possibilities ahead of them. That discussion often misses or leaves to one side the many steps that are required to get to that point. I am thinking about the efforts of many families around the country to have children and their frustration that their best endeavours do not always produce the results. It is a complex process and there are many things that need to go well and right to produce the foundations for a viable human life with all of the consciousness and personality and possibility. At some point in that process, well before all those preconditions have been met, there is scope for us to carry out some research. The benefits of that are health giving and life sustaining for people. You could argue that it is a life-giving enterprise. The safeguards against the misuse of that technology are embedded in the bill. I am particularly interested in the steps, which I was

strongly supportive of, to guard against commercialisation and the prospect of women being offered financial inducement to provide eggs to support this research. I am pleased that there are safeguards in place against that.

I am encouraged by the work the Lockhart review committee has brought forward. I think their thoughtful review gives us confidence in supporting Senator Patterson's bill. This is not to say that tomorrow there will be cures for horrendous illnesses that represent an enormous challenge for the people who carry those illnesses. This is not to say that tomorrow there will be relief for the selfless carers who stand by supporting those people. That is not what we are discussing. This bill is about providing an opportunity down the track for new insights produced with the best of all goodwill and the best enterprise that minds can bring and research can offer. It is the same opportunity that advocates of adult stem cell research offer. It is not a fait accompli that we will have the benefits tomorrow, but it is not appropriate to shut off that possibility when the safeguards and the thought that has gone into this bill are in place. I am persuaded by the Lockhart review committee and their work. They are an eminent panel of people and their eminence has not been in question. Their expertise was aggregated into an outstanding group of individuals, motivated by the best intentions, carrying out important work to help shape our decision making.

I do not for one minute discount the strength of feeling people have about this subject. I have taken that on board and welcomed the input from many in my electorate. It has helped shape and influence my views. But there are two things that I want to talk about. When I travel around the electorate I often talk about what a member of parliament does, Mr Deputy Speaker Kerr, and at times I reflect on some of the work that you and I have done together on standing committees. I talk about the work that the Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs did when looking at this issue of cloning, the regulatory framework and the prospects for embryonic stem cell research, and how the parliament came together to carry out that work through a parliamentary committee. I use that example to illustrate how we all come together to do good for this country.

When I visit schools I illustrate the complexity of our work by reflecting on that time. It was a demanding time of great searching, and I was almost overwhelmed by the goodwill and effort that people put into informing our work and by the quality of the final product. Even though our views were slightly different, it was an example of the parliament functioning at its best. I illustrate the potential for the parliament to function by reflecting on the topic we are debating today.

Occasionally amongst the school groups there is a young person with diabetes. We talk about the condition of their pancreas and we hope that one day we could cure that. There is a strong view that that is an appropriate thing to do. We then pick out a normally raucous and boisterous and terrific young person and say, 'We all love and admired Duncan for who he is,' and everyone nods their heads, 'but would we want another one of him?' Pretty quickly they all go, 'No, we're pretty fond of him, but we don't want him again.'

You talk that through and the kids can see these challenges where the scientific processes are close to each other but the outcomes are distinctly different. There is clarity about our work to help and heal those people where we have the scope to do that and that research is an important part of that, but we are not aiming to replicate Duncan, as fond as we may be of him. The kids see that quite clearly, and so do I. I look at my own kids and hope that, as they venture into this world and pursue the delicious possibilities that are out there, we can do what we can to help them if, heaven forbid, illness may intercept them. This is what I am on about. I got elected to public life to try to improve the lives of the people that I represent. I am in the hope business—hope that we can offer better prospects for the future, more opportunities and better potential for the best possible quality of life. That is what gets me out of bed each day, and that is why I am supporting this bill.

I have also been moved by correspondence from Phyllis Woodger, who talked about her dear husband, Ken. Phyllis might not realise it, but I worked with Ken. He was a mentor when I had my first job after leaving school. While I was out emptying parking meters in the rain in Frankston, Ken was a respected engineer at Frankston City Council. He spent a lot of time developing my understanding of engineering and of where that fit within functioning communities. Ken was very ill, and passed away not so long ago. I would like to share with the House Phyllis's thoughts. She asked me to consider them as I formed my view on the debate today, and I will read her letter. She says:

I have been following the current debate on stem cell research closely, and I am very anxious to see the Lockhart Report implemented so that Australian researchers and scientist are allowed to participate in the new beneficial work in this field.

Just 12 months ago my husband Ken (aged 65 years) died from Motor Neurone Disease—the years prior to this death were a nightmare for Ken and our whole extended family.

The hope for people suffering from many incurable terminal conditions is stem cell therapy and I feel it is imperative that every effort be made here and overseas to give relief to families and sufferers.

I hope that in the forthcoming conscience vote you will think of people like Ken and vote accordingly.

Phyllis, I do think of Ken. I think of all of those who have benefited from medical and scientific research to help our wellness as a people, and this is part of that picture with the appropriate safeguards. I also know that if this research, whether or not it is carried out here under our supervision and on our watch, produces insights that help with curing illnesses and improving our wellbeing, I would like to have access to it and I hope my kids do. If those insights are gained overseas, I would still like to have access to them. Australia has never been a passenger in life or in international affairs. We should play our part in the search for those remedies and therapies because I know the people I represent will want to benefit from them. It is for that reason that I, on balance, support the bill. I congratulate Senator Patterson for her work, and I congratulate the parliament too for the way it has discussed and deliberated views on this matter.