



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN EMBRYOS AND PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (3.57 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Research Involving Human Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Amendment Bill 2007. In doing so I confess to the House that I have deliberated on the content of the bill for some time. I come to this debate having made a decision about how I will cast my vote but continuing to experience considerable conflict within myself. Nevertheless, it is my responsibility to determine a course of action and in doing so I am conscious that I am also representing my constituents.

In 2002 the Council of Australian Governments agreed to nationally consistent legislation to regulate human embryo research and prohibit human cloning. The Commonwealth's Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2002 and Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002 were passed in December of that year. The complementary Queensland Research Involving Human Embryo and Prohibition of Human Cloning Act 2003 was passed in March of that year. Queensland also signed an intergovernmental agreement on 31 March 2004 to facilitate the national scheme.

The Commonwealth acts required independent reviews of their operation by 19 December 2005. A Legislation Review Committee chaired by retired Federal Court judge the Hon. John Lockhart, known as the Lockhart review committee, tabled a report with 54 recommendations in both houses of the Commonwealth parliament on 19 December 2005. The Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction and the Regulation of Human Embryo Research Amendment Act 2006, which amended the Commonwealth acts to give effect to most of the Lockhart review committee's recommendations, commenced on 12 June 2007. The corresponding Queensland act requires the minister to review the act as soon as possible after December 2005 and stipulates that the review may be undertaken as part of the review of the Commonwealth acts. Queensland participated in the Lockhart review and community and stakeholder consultation was undertaken by the Lockhart review committee. Consequently, there is a view that the findings of the Lockhart review are sufficiently representative of the views of the Queensland community not to warrant separate review of the Queensland act.

The states have undertaken to introduce corresponding legislation into their respective parliaments by 12 June 2008, and consequently we have this bill before us. This bill proposes to allow the following research activities subject to the activity being licensed by the National Health and Medical Research Council Embryo Research Licensing Committee: creating human embryos other than by fertilisation of a human egg by human sperm and the use of such embryos for research; creating human embryos by a process other than by fertilisation of a human egg by human sperm containing genetic material provided by more than two persons and the use of such embryos for research; creating human embryos using precursor cells from a human embryo or a human foetus and the use of such embryos for research; undertaking research and training involving the fertilisation of a human egg up to but not including the first mitotic division outside the body of a woman for the purposes of research and training; and creating hybrid embryos by the fertilisation of an animal egg by human sperm and developing the embryos up to but not

including the first mitotic division provided that the creation is for the purposes of testing sperm quality and will occur in an accredited artificial reproductive technology centre.

When one lists the proposed activities to be allowed by this bill, it is abundantly clear that the bill deals with issues of profound importance for the social, philosophical, cultural, religious, ethical and moral fabric of our society and asks members to make a fundamental value judgement about how our society will weigh up the relative benefits of medical research and scientific endeavour against the sanctity of human life and the nature of the human condition.

As a number of members have also said during this debate, I am not a scientist. The extent of my understanding of the scientific aspects of human biology is derived from taking biological science in years 11 and 12 at Tully State High School. While I had great teachers in those two years and those two years were not so long ago, I am not convinced that a B plus in biological science on my Senior Certificate provides me with sufficient scientific knowledge to speak intelligently about matters as important and as complicated as the matters contained in this bill from a scientific perspective. As such, I can only speak from the perspective of an ordinary Queenslander and try to be true to myself in considering this issue.

I want to recognise the member for Surfers Paradise for presenting to this House a very professional and a very genuine contribution. I must say that I admired his contribution. I feel that it was a distinguished way for the second reading debate on this sensitive issue to commence. Equally, I was moved to listen to the contribution made by the member for Mulgrave, who related to this House from a position of personal experience about coping with serious illness a view that was put with equal sincerity and conviction. Today the member for Southern Downs presented a compelling argument, and I want to acknowledge his contribution and the clarity and the intellectual rigour with which it was put.

I am a relatively young man. Indeed, I am the youngest member of this the 52nd Parliament of Queensland. I am part of generation Y. My generation has grown up parallel with the rapid progress of technology of all kinds, where innovation has become almost an expectation rather than a landmark breakthrough or a triumph of human ingenuity. My generation is one that has grown up to be conditioned to accept the new model or the latest version. So much of the argument that supports the amendments proposed in this bill to progress embryonic stem cell research asks us to trust in the imperative that conducting such research has the potential to secure advances in the treatment of a range of debilitating diseases and illnesses afflicting many in our community. It asks us to condone the activities that will be made lawful by the passing of this legislation which I listed earlier without any certainty that the result will be positive.

As a member of generation Y, it would ordinarily be expected that having observed the benefits of developments in technology—scientific, medical and otherwise—in my everyday life I would be disposed towards embracing the use of technology for the purpose of the research activities contained in this bill. After all, hasn't it delivered so much already? Yes, it has. That much is clear. On the other hand, this point also begs the question: what hasn't technology delivered despite the best efforts of our best minds in our most advanced institutions? What diseases, what illnesses, what afflictions will never be cured? That much is not clear. There are no answers to that question, just as there are no answers to the question of what cures will be discovered if these amendments are agreed to. What must exercise our minds simultaneously with the prospects that embryonic stem cell research may deliver the advances in science leading to cures for medical conditions is that it is equally probable that it may not.

We as representatives in this democratically elected parliament are the custodians of our civil society. To this end, we must make a value judgement about whether or not we should equivocate on certain long-term social, moral, philosophical and ethical principles about the sanctity of human life and its intrinsic value. We have a responsibility to consider that question very carefully. It would be a soundly conceived criticism of me to say that as a young man my relatively limited life experience compromises my capacity to make a fully informed decision on this issue. Have I loved and lost enough? Have I really felt enough pain after losing someone close to me from a disease or an illness that may benefit from the research activities in this bill? This is just one of the clouds of doubt that I have faced during my own personal deliberations and it would be dishonest of me not to admit to the House that that aspect of considering this bill has weighed heavily on my conscience. I am not blind to the suffering of those afflicted with a range of serious diseases and illnesses that ravage their physical condition, that can so seriously undermine their quality of life, their mental health and their relationships with their family and their friends. It would be disingenuous of me to say that I understand what they are going through. How can I possibly maintain such an argument when I do not suffer as they do? I cannot stand here and say that it is not a limitation of my own experience, and I must recognise and reconcile that with myself.

When I made my maiden speech in this place just over 12 months ago in October last year I said that I was conscious of the added responsibility of being a representative of Queensland's young people in addition to being the voice of the people of the Hinchinbrook electorate. I said then that the Queensland parliament ought to reflect the wider Queensland community and that it was appropriate that young people have a voice in this place. I said also that I was determined that my voice would make thoughtful and

constructive contributions in the best interests of the community as a whole as young people are part of it and not separate from it, and I have certainly reflected on those words in my deliberations with respect to this bill.

Due to the controversial nature of the matters contained in this bill, members of the Queensland parliament from all political parties will exercise a conscience vote when considering their individual position on the content of the bill and its relative merits or otherwise for proclamation as law in this state. There has been considerable public debate with respect to this bill as equivalent legislation has already been passed by the Commonwealth parliament by members and senators exercising a conscience vote and I have received volumes of correspondence from those interest groups and lobby groups supporting and opposing the bill respectively, as I am sure all members have. I am a relatively new member of this place. It is relatively rare in modern parliaments with disciplined political parties for parliamentarians who are party members to be given the opportunity to exercise a conscience vote. I have resolved to cast my vote in a particular way, but in doing so I want to make it quite clear that I fully respect and fully support the right of individual members who have resolved differently from me.

I listened carefully to the contribution of the member for Callide and agree with him that issues of this nature should always be considered by way of a conscience vote. No member should be criticised for their personal views in relation to a matter as sensitive as this if they have endeavoured to inform themselves appropriately or if they can justify their position based on a clearly irreconcilable conflict with their faith or their deeply held moral or ethical convictions.

As members of this parliament, it is an honour to be asked to represent the constituents of our electorates. In circumstances like these when we face a conscience vote, we are extended a great privilege to act on our own volition, knowing that we must simultaneously accept the consequences of that decision. The matters contained in the bill are of profound importance and deal with issues fundamental to the human condition. Some in the science community assert that research could lead to cures for a range of diseases and that, for the benefit of many people in the community who suffer, this could be significant. However, my interpretation of the bill creates serious personal conflict with respect to my personal beliefs. As such, my consideration of the bill is a task which I am finding very difficult. I realise that, by opposing this bill to adhere to my own personal beliefs, I am indicating to those less fortunate than me that I am willing to stand in the way of research that may give them an opportunity to lead a better life.

As stated earlier, the bill proposes to allow for the creation of human embryos other than by fertilisation of a human egg by a human sperm and the use of such embryos for research during which they will be destroyed. For me personally, there is something too clinical about that proposal for me to support this legislation. I have listened carefully to the arguments progressed by members in this House in favour of and in opposition to this bill. I have listened carefully to the scientists and the interest groups that have provided me with information both in favour of and in opposition to this bill. Lastly, I have listened carefully to those individuals in my electorate who have approached me with their own views both in favour of and in opposition to this bill. Ultimately, I know that my life, the lives of my immediate family—my father, my mother and my brother—the lives of my extended family members, the lives of my friends, those people whom I love, began as an embryo. I know that those embryos came into existence as a result of a process that is still not fully understood. I know that these embryos then developed and each of us is now living our individual lives. There are still mysteries about life which science cannot fully explain and personally I hope will never be able to explain. This is part of what gives all human life its intrinsic value.

The thought of condoning a practice that will create an embryo which, all things being equal, if allowed to develop would result in a human being and an individual life full of unique experiences only to destroy it for the purposes of scientific research, in my view, violates the principle of the sanctity of human life and is something which I cannot support. I am racked with conflict about this decision for the reasons I outlined earlier as I am not without compassion, concern and empathy for those who suffer with diseases, illnesses and afflictions for which there is currently no cure. But there is something too arbitrary about the manner in which man-made legislation in this or any other parliament can provide for the lawful destruction of embryos. I cannot support the creation of an arbitrary mechanism that determines which embryos will progress and which will not. I cannot overcome the moral dilemma that this presents to me personally, and that is that all of them are potential lives that would have a unique set of experiences in the course of living that life.

I say to those constituents in my electorate of Hinchinbrook who do not concur with my decision that I hope they can forgive me and understand that I have resolved to oppose this legislation after careful scrutiny of the best information available to me. Ultimately, this information did not convince me that it possessed sufficient merit for me to ignore my concerns. This is a matter of conscience and I am afraid that my conscience will not allow me to support this bill.