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Vote against cloning, or else, Pell warns

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Cardinal George Pell has warned Catholic politicians they face "consequences" in the life of the church should they vote for an "immoral" bill before the NSW Parliament to expand stem cell research.

In calling for a "no" vote, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney said he wasn't threatening excommunication.

However, he didn't rule out that their vote would disqualify them as church members or "loosen" their bonds with the church, which has taken a strong pro-life position on therapeutic cloning.

Catholic MPs would need to seriously think about taking Holy Communion, the key sacrament, Dr Pell said, and "were certainly doing the wrong thing".

The NSW Lower House is expected tonight to start debating whether to allow scientists to obtain stem cells from embryos through a process called somatic cell nuclear transfer but to ban human cloning for reproduction. A vote on the matter is expected soon.

MPs from both sides of politics will be allowed a conscience vote on the legislation, which would bring NSW in line with the Commonwealth after it dumped the ban on therapeutic cloning last year.

Dr Pell said no Catholic politician in good conscience could support any legislation that gave scientists "open slather for unethical research", which he claimed included the mixing of genetic material from three or more "parents", the fertilisation of immature eggs from aborted baby girls and creating human and animal hybrids as a test for sperm quality.

"These possibilities are quite grotesque and I'd be very surprised if they had approval throughout the population," he said.

"To create a human embryo for the express purpose of using it and destroying, that's the way we treat lab rats. It's totally inappropriate for human beings. It's a perverse new direction in human experimentation.

"I don't think Catholic politicians, Christian politicians or pro-life politicians who has properly informed their conscience should vote for these changes."

"Cloning is not quite the same as abortion and the legislation for such a thing as cloning is different from actually performing cloning," Dr Pell told reporters.

"But it is a serious moral matter and Catholic politicians who vote for this legislation must realise that their voting has consequences for their place in the life of the church."

Dr Bernie Tuch, director of the NSW Stem Cell Network, said Dr Pell "knew more about religion than science".

The bill banned the fertilisation of mature eggs from whatever source including fetuses, as well as the fertilisation of animal eggs with human genetic DNA.

Greens' warning

Intensive lobbying by conservative MPs could lead to the defeat of the legislation, the Greens said.

Greens MP Lee Rhiannon said she feared the bill could be defeated in the Legislative Council.

She said some MPs had been actively lobbying colleagues to vote against the bill "in a way that is most inappropriate".

"The Greens are concerned that of a number of conservative religious MPs from Labor, the Coalition parties and some of the crossbenchers are combining, doing intense lobbying to try to win more MPs to their point of view," Ms Rhiannon told reporters.

"Let's remember this research is badly needed, and if such people object to this research proceeding they don't need to use any of the products that may be developed.

"They certainly should not use their religion and their power as an MP to block that research going ahead and potentially bringing great relief to the sick and vulnerable."

NSW Premier Morris Iemma has indicated he will support the bill, describing it as a "balanced package", which would offer hope to thousands of people suffering from otherwise incurable diseases.

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