

Angels and demons: how stem cells split the Libs

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News

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A ministerial document obtained by the AFR reveals the extraordinary rifts within the Howard government over the contentious issue of cloning. John Breush reports.

The office of federal Ageing Minister Santo Santoro drafted a strategy for defeating the therapeutic cloning bill that includes pushing Prime Minister John Howard to delay the vote and recruiting a spokesman for the disabled to rebut hard-luck stories of people suffering long-term diseases.

With hearings on the divisive issue running this week, the one-page draft document, obtained by The Australian Financial Review, provides a rare insight into the behind-the-scenes lobbying on the stem cell issue.

The plan hints at the depth of the split between the Liberals' religious right and secular factions, warning that "rebel conservatives represent a larger threat to party unity than rebel progressives".

It reveals doubts about whether encouraging church leaders to speak against cloning will allow the campaign to be painted as "superstition".

It uses Christian terminology, referring to the "archangels and angels" of the anti-stem cell movement, but also suggests Jews and Muslims might be enlisted as allies.

The document was written on August 17, two days after Mr Howard caved in to pressure from moderates by telling his party room he would allow a conscience vote on scrapping the ban on therapeutic cloning.

Since then, Senator Santoro, a staunch Catholic and prominent moral conservative, has been accused of aggressively lobbying his colleagues on the issue. His office

declined to comment further yesterday.

Therapeutic cloning creates a clone embryo by replacing the nucleus of a human egg cell with the nucleus of a cell taken from an adult with a genetic condition.

Supporters say the therapy could lead to cures for diseases such as Parkinson's, diabetes and cancer, but moral conservatives question its effectiveness and attack the morality of creating an embryo knowing it will be destroyed.

Because the draft document has at least two authors - identified via Microsoft Word's "track changes" function - it reveals the extent to which a debate over tactics has taken place within the anti-cloning ranks.

It is titled "Lockhart Strategy" after the government-appointed expert group under the late judge John Lockhart that last year recommended allowing therapeutic cloning.

The original version of the document appears to have been written on the computer of Senator Santoro's chief of staff, David de Carvalho, a former chief executive of the National Catholic Education Commission.

It begins by setting out two objectives: to "avoid a parliamentary vote" and to "reinstate party stability by holding a conscience vote in the party room".

The anti-therapeutic lobby's message, it says, should be that "this is not just about cloning".

"This [is] about public perceptions of party discipline and unity," it warns.

"Rebel conservatives represent a larger threat to party unity than rebel progressives."

Liberal senator Kay Patterson had only the day before announced she would prepare a private member's bill to implement the recommendations of the Lockhart review.

The strategy document's second author, who was writing some time later, knew that it was already too late to try to avoid a parliamentary conscience vote.

This author deletes the discussion up to that point and writes: "I suspect that we are past the point of no return."

The lower part of the paper turns to tactics.

Under the heading of "strategies", the original version of the document proposes a list of activities:

* "[Finance Minister] Nick Minchin ask PM to put the brakes on: haste to avoid scrutiny and education?"

* "Invitation from PM to [Queensland Institute of Medical Research director] Michael

Goode [sic] to present a seminar on the science.

- * "Ethical and Regulatory perspectives: Megan Best; Christopher Newell [both medical ethicists and members of the Anglican Church].
- * "Speaking notes for the archangels, angels, cherubim and seraphim [possibly a reference to church followers lobbying against cloning].
- * "Promote education . . .
- * "Lobby the churches to speak out publicly - bigger than [abortion pill] RU486 and IR - Wilson, Pell, Jensen, Aspinall, Brian Houston.
- * "Ask Henry about the Jews.
- * "Colin Masters on false hope. [Masters is a leading Melbourne neurobiologist who has questioned the effectiveness of stem-cell research.]
- * "Paediatrician from West Mead [sic]."

The second author questions several of these suggestions.

On using Minchin, a prominent therapeutic cloning critic, to push for delay, there is, perhaps surprisingly, no concern this would clash with the Prime Minister's public commitment to a free conscience vote.

The concern is whether delay would help the anti-stem-cell cause.

"I am uncertain about whether or not delay works for us or against us," they write.

"One of our challenges is to rebut politically the hard-luck stories. Greg Pike [the director of Adelaide's Southern Cross Bioethics Institute and a therapeutic cloning critic] was on Adelaide radio this morning and thought the scientific argument did not negate the emotional argument. We need to think about the benefit to the other side of a delay as well as the benefit to us."

The first author's proposal about enlisting Christopher Newell, an associate professor of medical ethics at the University of Tasmania and an ordained Anglican minister, is picked up by the second author because it raises the issue of how to deal with claims that therapeutic cloning offers a solution to chronic diseases such as diabetes and Parkinson's.

The second author warns it was their understanding that Professor Newell would not enter the stem cell debate publicly - a problem, given his status as a leading advocate for people with disabilities.

They wrote that he could be replaced in terms of a person "representing the disabled, but any substitute will not be of the same calibre".

The original author also sets sights on bringing some of Australia's most influential

church leaders into the public debate: the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, George Pell, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, the Anglican Primate of Australia, Phillip Aspinall, the senior pastor of Sydney's Hillsong church, Brian Houston, and "Wilson" - possibly a reference to either Melbourne's Anglican Bishop Administrator, John Wilson, or Adelaide's Catholic archbishop, Philip Wilson.

But the second author urges caution about recruiting church leaders to the cause.

"We need to consider this carefully," the document says.

"To date some church leaders have made their views clear privately. This has been deliberate. The extent of public involvement of church leaders needs to take into account one strategy of the other side - this is science v superstition - and of the dynamics within the building."

Following the strategy document's discussion of the role of church leaders, the track-change function identifies another contributor to the strategy document, possibly indicating a third writer, although it may just be the second author writing again.

They pick up the suggestion that "Henry", whoever that might be, should be asked "about the Jews".

The new author proposes that this line of thought could be taken further.

"There is also the matter of Muslims and the Orthodox, about which I need to make inquiries," the writer says.

And the paediatrician from Western Sydney's Westmead Hospital? "I believe he has retired," is the comment.

It is not clear to what extent the strategy has been adopted. Prime Minister John Howard said recently he had yet to make up his mind about the issue after earlier saying he favoured the status quo. On the proposal for delay, the Senate committee looking into the issue is due to report its findings by this Friday, paving the way for a parliamentary debate to start two weeks later.

In the two months since the strategy document was written, Cardinal Pell is the only church leader cited in the document to have taken a prominent stance in the embryonic stem-cell debate.

For instance, in a September opinion article for the Sunday Telegraph, he wrote: "It is not right to create human embryos to destroy them for research purposes."

But there are signs religious leaders are becoming more outspoken as the conscience vote nears. In a statement released last week, Australia's Catholic bishops said the push to allow embryonic stem-cell research demonstrated a "contempt for life".

Of other anti-stem-cell experts, Megan Best, the Anglican ethicist who was listed to provide perspective, has already made her mark in the debate.

As national convenor of the newly formed group Doctors Against Cloning, Best earlier this month released a letter, signed by 185 medicos, that has been sent to all MPs and senators warning of "the ethical and scientific misconceptions surrounding the cloning debate".

She also arranged for Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor James Sherley, a prominent American critic of therapeutic cloning, to visit Australia last week to speak to MPs about the dangers of the technology.

Greg Pike, the ethicist who struggled to rebut hard-luck stories of the disabled on Adelaide radio, appeared on the first day of hearings on Friday.

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