

Cloning supporters brace for battle

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A leading advocate of therapeutic cloning has warned that the technology's opponents risk a backlash within coalition ranks if they attempt to depict the debate as a test of the Howard government's unity.

As federal politicians prepare to vote on a private members bill to scrap the ban on embryonic stem- cell research, Liberal MP Mal Washer said any attempts to intimidate senators into voting against the bill could backfire.

The Australian Financial Review yesterday revealed details of a draft strategy paper, prepared by the office of Minister for Ageing Santo Santoro, that exposes how MPs opposed to embryonic stem-cell research planned to lobby their colleagues to vote against the private members bill.

"This [is] about public perceptions of party discipline and unity," the paper says.

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

Written two months ago, the paper reflects the tone of much of the behind-the-scenes lobbying that has taken place since.

But Dr Washer said he believed coalition senators would not accept warnings by critics of therapeutic cloning that anyone supporting the bill would put their preselection at risk.

"The more people try to intimidate or cajole, the more likelihood it will backfire on them," he said.

As one strategy, the paper outlines plans to find a spokesman to represent people with disabilities, to counter claims by disabled groups that therapeutic cloning could lead to cures for their ailments.

SpinalCure Australia chief executive Bob Turner said yesterday he was aware of a small number of paraplegics and quadriplegics who would refuse treatments based

on embryonic stem-cell research.

"But they're few and far between compared to the thousands who would be glad to be free of the disabilities they suffer," he said.

The paper also cites medical ethicist Megan Best as someone who could speak on the ethical and regulatory aspects of therapeutic cloning.

Giving evidence yesterday before a Senate committee looking into the issue, Dr Best, representing the Sydney Anglican Church, said that while nobody would oppose the search for cures to diseases, scientific research should always be subject to ethical boundaries.

"There are basic values which we hold as a community, where we respect each other as human beings, which should not be transgressed in pursuit of these goods," she said.

The strategy paper proposes enlisting Finance Minister Nick Minchin, an opponent of therapeutic cloning, to ask Prime Minister John Howard to delay the conscience vote.