

MPs take sides in stem cell debate

6th November 2006, 21:22 WST

Senior government ministers have made the most of a rare conscience vote, taking opposing sides during a Senate debate on a controversial bill to overturn a ban on therapeutic cloning.

Parliament is considering a private member's bill from former health minister Kay Patterson to allow researchers to clone human embryos to extract their stem cells, in the hope of one day finding cures for debilitating diseases.



The bill requires cloned embryos to be destroyed within 14 days and does not allow them to be implanted into a woman.

Existing laws allow stem cells to be harvested from surplus IVF embryos, but prevent embryos being created through therapeutic cloning.

Finance Minister Nick Minchin labelled the bill "repugnant", saying he had serious concerns about cloning embryos for research and destroying them.

"The repugnant and thoroughly unethical and objectionable means to be permitted by this bill do not justify the ends," Senator Minchin said.

"Human life is an end in itself. It is not and should not ever be an instrument of science, or a disposable ingredient for improvements in clinical practice, student training and rudimentary scientific research that is very far from passing the test of proof and perfection in animal studies."

His cabinet colleague, Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone, backed the bill, saying science offered "great hope to humanity".

Senator Vanstone said Australia already permitted research using surplus IVF eggs, fertilised by semen, which might otherwise have ended up a human.

"So the logic is lost on me as to why we would not then allow eggs that are not in fact fertilised by semen, but in fact have some material removed which is then replaced with some other material in vitro, and use those (for research)," she said.

Justice Minister Chris Ellison appeared set to vote against the legislation.

"What has changed so much in the last few years to warrant this bill?," he said.

After 10 hours of debate it appeared the vote would be close, with 18 senators speaking in support of the bill and 18 against.

Prime Minister John Howard says he has not yet made up his mind on the issue.

Earlier, supporters of the bill accused opponents of waging a scare campaign.

"Much of this debate has been made up of scare scenarios which have been pushed to the absolute limit of science fiction to try and persuade those who are in favour of the bill why they should not vote for it," Liberal senator Judith Troeth said.

Liberal senator Jeannie Ferris labelled as "abhorrent" newspaper advertisements that "disgracefully claimed ... that there will be cloned foetus farming".

NSW Labor senator and cancer survivor Steve Hutchins said thousands of eggs would be needed for research, and raised reports of eastern European women being rendered infertile through selling their eggs.

"We don't know what doors we will be opening if we pass this bill," Senator Hutchins said.

Family First senator Steve Fielding said advocates of embryonic stem cell research had been trying to "peddle false hope" about the potential medical benefits.

Supporters argue the bill contains sufficient safeguards, including jail sentences of up to 15 years, to prevent scientists misusing the technology.

Debate continues on Tuesday, with a vote due by Friday.

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