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PM - Rudd sides with PM on stem cell bill

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Reporter: Chris Uhlmann

MARK COLVIN: In Canberra, and after just two days in the job the new Opposition leader Kevin Rudd has found himself in total agreement with the Prime Minister John Howard.

Both men have just told the Parliament that they will not support the Private Member's Bill designed to lift the ban on therapeutic cloning.

The vote is expected some time tonight, perhaps some time quite soon, and it now looks likely to be closer than many expected when the debate first started.

Our Chief Political Correspondent, Chris Uhlmann, is in our Canberra studio. He joins us with the latest.

Chris, both the Prime Minister and the Opposition leader are going to vote against the bill. What reasons did they give?

CHRIS UHLMANN: Both of them talked about their own personal experiences, Mark. In fact, the Prime Minister spoke about the relationship that he had with Justice Lockhart of course, who was the person who did the review of the original bill.

You'll recall that Parliament first voted on this about three years ago, and voted unanimously then that it would not include therapeutic cloning in that bill, so there was a ban on it. And of course the vote that we're having now is to overturn that ban, in effect.

So that was the first reason the Prime Minister gave for not supporting the bill, was that he didn't believe the debate had moved far enough for the Parliament so soon after that vote to completely change its point of view.

He did give another reason for that, and I'll let him say that in his own words in just a minute or so.

Kevin Rudd was interesting too. Of course, he has made much of the fact that he is a Christian and is guided by those beliefs, and he spoke about his mother's experience of dying of Parkinson's disease. And what he said of that was that his mother was a Catholic from central casting, and he asked her what it was he should do on the last vote, a vote that he said he found very, very difficult indeed. And she said, in great Catholic tradition, "well, that's a matter for your conscience".

But let's hear now from the Prime Minister, and from the Leader of the Opposition, what they had to say in the Chamber today. And, as I said, the Prime Minister said, "first of all I'm

voting against this because I don't think enough time has passed since the decision we made last time," and then he gave another reason, and this is it.

JOHN HOWARD: I think we do live in an age where we have slid too far into relativism, and there must be some absolutes in our society.

Now, that is, in some senses, a religious, a Christian, or religious view, but it's also an ethical view, and it's a view of society that a person of no faith can hold very strongly.

I'm not so censorious of alternative points of view in our community as to believe that you can't, on balance, reach different points of view, but in the end you have to, as an individual, make a judgment on this, and my own view is to vote in favour of this bill is to embrace a relativist view of society and of the value of human life and what leads to it, which does, to use that cliché, get us perilously close if not onto the slippery slope.

KEVIN RUDD: I find it very difficult to support a legal regime that results in the creation of a form of human life for the single and explicit purpose of conducting experimentation on that form of human life.

Furthermore, I'm concerned about the crossing of such an ethical threshold and where that may lead in the long-term. And for these reasons, I will not be supporting the legislation.

MARK COLVIN: Kevin Rudd, and before him the Prime Minister John Howard, both of them in very reflective and quiet speeches, as opposed to some of the normal hubbub we're used to from Parliament.

Chris Uhlmann, advocates of the bill, after it was pretty close in the Senate, thought that in the House of Representatives they'd have a much easier ride. Is it turning out that way?

CHRIS UHLMANN: That's certainly the feeling. When I spoke to Mal Washer earlier this afternoon, and he of course is the sponsor of the bill ...

MARK COLVIN: That's the Liberal doctor?

CHRIS UHLMANN: That's right, Dr Mal Washer from Western Australia.

I should say, too, the division is in progress as we speak, and in around about 20 seconds' time hopeful we'll have an answer on the numbers. I can say that earlier today he was reasonably confident that he did have the numbers. The vote that's taking place at the moment is on the in-principle stage of the bill, so this will give a very good indication of how it goes.

There are some amendments that are proposed, but there wasn't the feeling that they would have an enormous change on the way that the vote would go.

So the division is in progress, it has just finished, and in a moment or two we should have an answer on how this bill has gone at first, at least in the in-principle stage.

MARK COLVIN: There has been something of a pattern that more women than men have been voting for this, in the Senate that seemed to be, or I read that that was the way it was. Is it the same in the Reps?

CHRIS UHLMANN: It seems to be going that way. I haven't got a definitive count on the number of women who have supported it as opposed to it.

It is interesting to note, though, that the young South Australian Labor MP Kate Ellis did vote against the bill today.

So the Prime Minister said, and it is true of these sorts of votes, that a conscience vote does bring out the best in Parliament. Alas, Mark, we don't have very many of these kinds of votes.

MARK COLVIN: Any news yet, Chris?

CHRIS UHLMANN: No, the division is still in progress. I will end here and get you the latest as soon as we have the numbers I'll put them through to your studio.

MARK COLVIN: Chris Uhlmann, our Chief Political Correspondent, thanks very much.

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