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Stem cell votes differ for Labor leaders

December 7, 2006 - 9:04AM

A differing view with Labor leader Kevin Rudd on the issue of therapeutic cloning of human embryos did not point to any ideological difference between the two, deputy leader Julia Gillard said.

Mr Rudd voted against the controversial bill in parliament, saying he found it difficult to support a legal regime that supported the creation of a human life for the single and explicit purpose of experimentation on it.

But Ms Gillard, the party's health spokeswoman in recent years, voted for the bill, which was ultimately successful.

"This was a conscience vote and so members of parliament, irrespective of political parties went all ways on it," she told the Nine Network.

"I had an opportunity to study the legislation over a long period of time as shadow health minister. I talked to Kevin about it closely and I understood that Kevin was very likely to oppose the legislation.

"We've come down on different sides on this one. Many members of the government have come down on different sides too."

She said an example of this was Health Minister Tony Abbott being opposed while Defence Minister Brendan Nelson voted in favour of it.

"It's not about political parties, it's about something a bit deeper than that," Ms Gillard said.

Nationals Senate Leader Ron Boswell believes that most Australians would be absolutely horrified if they knew the real detail involved in a decision to overturn a ban on therapeutic cloning.

"It certainly doesn't reflect the community that I live in," Senator Boswell told reporters.

"I would think if people knew the details of it they would be absolutely horrified."

Senator Boswell said the true details were not able to be released.

NSW Liberal senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells said it was a sad day for Australia.

"I think this debate has been led in a very misleading and deceptive manner," she said.

"I think the Australian public have not really been told what precisely is in this bill.

"What sort of science now wants us to take cells from aborted female foetuses, where we are going to take eggs from dead women?"

"I really think that the Australian public when they do understand, and when the smoke and mirrors and some of the deceptive language that has been used is taken away, ... will realise that this is sick legislation and not the sort of legislation that they would expect reasonable and decent members of parliament to have supported."

The majority of the more than 100 MPs who spoke on the bill were in favour of changing the law.

Senator Fierravanti-Wells said it was very complicated legislation.

"It's about multinational companies that one day will gain a lot of benefit out of this," she said.

Liberal Tasmanian senator Guy Barnett said it was a result he had feared.

He said there should have been much more public debate on the issue.

"I feel deeply, deeply disappointed and saddened that we're now creating a life for the purposes of research, and that's destruction," he said.

"I don't think the community has any idea of the significance of the legislation in which we are debating today."

Parliament was given only its second conscience vote of the year on the legislation, following a vote on the abortion drug RU486 in February.

But after an emotional four-day debate, the final vote was an anti-climax, with MPs electing not to call a division and have their choice recorded.

An earlier conscience vote, on whether debate should continue to a third reading, returned an 82 to 62 result.

The House of Representatives also voted down an amendment that had threatened to scuttle the legislation.

The change would have prevented stem cells being extracted from the eggs of aborted late term female foetuses, but this procedure will remain acceptable under the bill.

Australian Democrats senator Natasha Stott Despoja said she was always hopeful of such a result, describing it as an "historic bill".

"(It) will give scientists and researchers the tools they need to understand diseases and hopefully one day cure them," she said.

"So I'm very proud of the role the Democrats played in this debate. It's a good piece of policy and it deserved to pass."

Australian Democrats Leader Andrew Bartlett said the issue would be reviewed again in a few years time, but said more debate was necessary.

"It's still a difficult issue and that's why I think it needs more debate," he said.

"I'm comfortable with what the legislation will allow, (but) I'm concerned about where the legislation might lead if there's not more debate."

Victorian Premier Steve Bracks has welcomed the controversial legislation.

Mr Bracks, a long-time advocate for overturning the ban, had threatened to push ahead with state-based legislation if Canberra refused to move on the issue.

"The debate around therapeutic cloning has shown yet again the importance the Australian public place in groundbreaking stem cell research," Mr Bracks said in a statement.


"Our scientists will now be able to conduct further research which offers hope to thousands of

Australian who suffer from debilitating diseases such as Parkinson's or motor neurone disease."

Victoria, which is home to the Australian Stem Cell Centre, was a "world leader" in that area of biomedical research, the Labor premier said.

"This historic piece of legislation will allow us to continue with that work and hopefully one day find cures for those who suffer from these illnesses."

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