

Dean Wells MP - Ideas and action

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Human Personhood

Sometimes Parliaments have to decide a purely philosophical issue, as happened when all Australian Parliaments passed mirroring legislation to allow medico-scientific experimentation on very early embryos. Such issues are usually conscience votes, and require all MPs to address very fundamental and very controversial questions.

May I begin by acknowledging the deep feelings and indicating respect for the sincerity of those who oppose this Bill. I would not support a measure that presented a problem for the religious beliefs of any group in the community unless I believed that the general good required it. Unless the general good required it, I would not support such a measure even if I believed, as I do, that the opposition to the Bill was not logically required by any words of scripture or any fundamental tenet of any denomination or any principle of scholastic philosophy. In other words, I believe that you can be a Christian and support this Bill. Nevertheless, a person's faith is what it is and their beliefs, right or wrong are what they are, and I would fight to the death for their right to hold them. But, if the common good requires that a measure be taken, then it is the responsibility of every elected representative to decide the issue on the basis of what they believe to be the truth, rather than avoiding the issue out of regard for the belief systems of fellow citizens they honour and respect.

In this case we are told by scientists who have devoted their lives to studying the matter that the research this Bill would allow might down the track allow medical advances that seem little short of miraculous. It matters not that there are other scientists who say that this is not so or tell us that the same could be achieved with adult stem cell research. Scientists always differ as to whether any significant advance could be achieved. The standard procedure for resolving differences of scientific opinion is to do the experiment. This Bill allows that experiment. This cup does not pass from us because the scientists differ.

The issue before this parliament is not a technical issue but a purely philosophical issue. Credible

people are telling us that if we allow them to do the research then they may be able to deliver a dramatic improvement in the human condition. We therefore need to decide on its merits whether there is anything wrong with the proposed research. The central argument against it is that the proposed research involves the deliberate generation of a human life for purposes which end in destroying it. We all know that it is wrong to willfully take human life. In a number of thoughtful contributions, including that of the Honourable Member for Maryborough, we have been told that human life begins at conception. There is no doubt that the tissue that composes the very early embryo is human and that it is alive. So it is argued that the Bill legalizes the taking of human life.

But let us speak with more precision. What we all agree is wrong is the taking of the life of a human person. It is not always wrong to destroy human tissue. We all cut our fingernails. So to vote accurately on this Bill we need to define clearly what is a human person. The life of a human person has a beginning and it has an end. There is fairly unanimous agreement as to what constitutes its end. For almost everyone, brain death, the cessation of brain function, marks the point at which we agree that the person we knew is no more. At that point we accept that the remaining tissue can be used for medical purposes, including organ transplant

So why, when we have no hesitation in saying that the cessation of brain function marks the end of a human person, are we tempted to think that there can exist a human person before the commencement of brain function? The answer may be, as the Honourable Member for Burdekin and others have suggested, because we are aware that the embryonic tissue has the potential to develop into a human person. And indeed it does, if placed in the right circumstances.

The trouble with the argument about potential is that it proves far too much. Every cell in your body has the potential to develop into a human person if placed in the right circumstance. In theory, the nucleus of any cell from a person's discarded fingernail, if placed in an embryonic cell, would, if gestated, grow into a duplicate of them. But the fact that such cells have the potential to develop into a human person does not provide any justification whatever for doing such an outrageous thing. So the mere fact that something has the potential to develop into a human person with a human brain does not entail that it is already a human person or that we have a moral obligation to set up circumstances in which it can become a human person. Logic therefore leads us to the proposition that if human personhood ends with the cessation of brain function it must begin with the commencement of brain function

We are all here to advance the common good, to improve the condition of humankind and that portion of it that we represent. I cannot, in conscience, vote to prohibit research which may help to save lives, cure debilitating illnesses and prevent the loss of human dignity when there is no logical reason to prohibit it. I say to my colleagues who believe that human tissue that is not attached to a functioning human brain may nevertheless have the rights we attach to a person: I respect their view but I think it is counterintuitive and I cannot support it. I say to my colleagues who oppose this in the name of religion: I respect their view, but I read the scriptures differently from them and I think that someone who shares their basic beliefs can come to a different conclusion.

In all conscience, I must support his Bill. In the future, when I meet a diabetic child, or when I shake the hand of a resident of an old people's home that cares for victims of Alzheimer's, or when I look into the eyes of patients in the accident emergency ward of my local hospital, I will be satisfied with the hard decision I am taking today.

May I say something to any members who have not yet made up their minds: the common good requires this of us. If they are thinking of opposing this in the name of the Christian religion, consider this. The founder of that religion did not just tell us how to live; He also healed the sick. The people who ask us to pass this Bill are doing so because they want to continue that part of His work.

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