

**PUBLIC MEETING AT ST BRYCE KIRK, KIRKCALDY
ADDRESS BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN
FRIDAY 28 MARCH 2008**

Introduction: Since my Easter Sunday sermon, less than a week ago, a great number of concerns have been raised about many aspects of the 'Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill' – apart from the content of the Bill, these also concern freedom of conscience.

I have been asked why I raised the matter at this time – on Easter Sunday morning in my Cathedral. My reply would be the same as to why I raised the issue of abortion at the end of May last year when we were commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Abortion Act. Then, as now, I am simply trying to draw attention to changes in legislation which will greatly affect the society in which we live.

At Easter we commemorate the new life brought by Jesus Christ; now I am considering, along with yourselves, just what sort of new life we will be celebrating in our own country in a few years time.

I have two main concerns – one concerning the liberty of conscience allowed by the Labour Party to Labour MPs who do not agree with the content of this Bill; the other concerning the Bill itself.

Freedom of Conscience: My remarks have focussed the attention of many on whether or not Labour Members of Parliament should be given a free vote with regard to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill. Many agree with me in that a free vote should be granted – particularly as free votes have been granted on causes much less important, such as fox hunting and the docking of dogs' tails! Consequently, when this Bill is considered, I would certainly maintain that Members of Parliament of whatever Party should be allowed to vote according to their conscience.

I would ask: when is a 'free vote' not a 'free vote'!

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has indicated that Labour MPs will be allowed a free vote on three key issues – the mixing of human and animal cells in research embryos, the use of IVF to create children who may be able to donate tissue or cells to cure a sick sibling, and the removal of the need to consider a child's need for a father when a woman applies for IVF. However, Gordon Brown stressed that he would be voting in favour of all of the controversial element of the Bill and said that he expected his Party to endorse its broad themes, while adding: "I fully respect the views of those who have specific religious objections". I would hope that the conscience of any Members of Parliament will not be dictated by their political party or leader – but will indeed really be a vote in conscience. If enough voices are raised against the Bill at the first stage, free votes may be extended to further stages.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill:

This Bill is concerned with, human life in its earliest incarnation, but make no mistake, it is human! Crucially, it is not 'potential human life' but 'human life with potential'.

We are told that the use of stem cells taken from human embryos 'might', 'could' or 'may' lead to treatments for many diseases – but these claims have been made now for over a decade without any substance. We continue to be told that experimenting on embryos will lead us to cures and treatments, particularly with diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and motor neuron disease.

Yet, as the years have gone by, not one single treatment or therapy has emerged. In the meantime, research using adult stem cells has led to over 70 different therapies and treatments, without destroying a single embryo. The creation of animal-human hybrid embryos is described as just a few little experiments to help the seriously ill and after all these embryos will be destroyed after 14 days.

However, I see this Bill as quite simply the thin edge of the wedge and ask "Where will we go to next?". I have mentioned the passing of the Abortion Act some 40 years ago in 1967. At that time I don't think anyone would have dreamt the statistics concerning abortion would be as they are now, when we have literally abortion on demand and pregnant teenagers are almost encouraged to have abortions. I myself have been accused of frightening people with statistics regarding the number of abortions. However, there is one vitally important statistic which we must have in mind concerning abortions at this time and it is quite simply to ask: "How many abortions have been refused over the past 40 years?". We are so often told how many healthy babies in the womb have been killed, denied life! How many girls and young women, along with their husbands (or nowadays 'partners') are told: "Please keep your unborn babies, give them life, with the help of the many agencies ready to help them". In other words how SAFE are the SAFEGAURDS we were promised then? And how likely is it that they would be any better today?

Is there a way ahead? I would ask both those who support me and those who criticise if there is any way ahead at this present time. I am aware of a great fear from many people who have spoken to me or written to me. The question being asked is quite simply: "What will our brave new world do next?"

If animal-embryos are allowed to be kept for 14 days – why not 14 weeks or 28 weeks? Instead of destroying such embryos, why not fertilise them to see just what will happen? What happened after the death of Dolly the sheep – apart from the fact that its remains are now stuffed and in the National Museum of Scotland? What can we say of the company which created Dolly the sheep and then went bankrupt without producing any useable treatments? What other companies are financially involved in this so-called research at the present time? What can we say of those who indicate that human beings are only animals after all – and we can do what we like with them?

I see the way ahead through bringing together the Churches and peoples of all faiths, along with scientists who are involved at this present time with the potential production of these human-animal hybrid embryos or who wish to consider such production themselves.

I have been approached by MPs and asked by others in the media to consider meeting with leading scientists who are currently involved in this area. I would be only too happy to agree to such a meeting and I am sure other Church representatives and leaders of other faiths would also agree. No doubt, it is well known that at the last two General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland the Assembly voted against experimentation on human embryos. Members of other

faiths are also strong in their defence of human life in its earliest stages. A joint statement, signed by the members of the Islamic Medical Association, Muslim Doctors Association, Islamic Medical Ethics Forum and Union of Muslim Organisations said British Muslims “fully support the Catholic leaders, Ministers and MPs in their opposition to this, the worst Bill in the history of Britain”. The Muslims labelled the Bill as an ‘inhumane, destructive and immoral Bill’. Those who are not particularly religious fall back on what is described as ‘natural law’, which in this case might be summed up as indicating: “What is being discussed is just not right! It is plain crazy!”

In agreeing to such a meeting my only condition would be that the scientists were also willing to accept instruction from our Churches and peoples of faith on basic morality, on what human life really is, on the purpose of our life on earth and so on. I would ask them to be open to considering the great major questions concerning ‘life’ in all its aspects which have concerned man quite literally since the beginning of time.

I would also urge them to accept the case for a single permanent statutory national Bioethics Commission in our country. This would be a body which would engage with public concerns and inform Parliament on complex ethical questions. I see it as quite unacceptable that matters of such immense public concern are left to a simple vote by Members of Parliament, who sometimes are not able to have a free conscience vote and in other cases are voting without a full understanding of the magnitude of the issue under consideration.

I think it is worth remembering that Canada and Australia, as well as France, Italy and Germany here in Europe, have all banned the grotesque procedures which we seek to legalise. It cannot be said that the citizens and politicians of those countries care nothing for the chronically ill among them. Perhaps they don’t want to develop cures or therapies; perhaps they are simply anti-scientific luddites! Or could it be that we are wrong – and those in other democracies see no reason to attack the sanctity and dignity of human life when many alternatives exist?

Conclusion: Among many others, I believe that this Bill is profoundly wrong and I know that many, many people agree with me. If you do agree with me, I urge you to contact your Member of Parliament as a matter of urgency and raise your concerns. I pray that you will be successful and that in defeating this legislation, we take our first steps on the road to becoming a society that truly and deeply values all human life!