

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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BIOETHICS, DEMOCRACY AND THE DISHONOURING OF GOD

Monday 19 and Tuesday 20 May 2008 were dreadful days. They were the days when the Committee of the whole House of Commons debated the *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill* (2008). They were the days when the United Kingdom became less compassionate and more God-dishonouring.

Four huge bioethical issues were debated for just three hours each – it was grossly inadequate. The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, had grudgingly given way following pressure to allow his Labour MPs to vote according to their consciences. But it was a token concession because they were reportedly ‘guided’ through the lobbies for some of the votes. And anyway, the Bill is certain to become law because it is a government Bill and Labour MPs will be officially whipped to support it during its later stages through the House and its success is further guaranteed because Labour has such a hefty majority – it is the price we pay for a democratic Parliament that is numerically skewed.

These were dreadful and also wearying days. I watched most of the proceedings live on the BBC Parliament channel. The droning voice and dire presentation of Dawn Primarolo (Minister of State, Department of Health), who was charged with moving the Bill, the pompous intrusions by John Bercow (Buckingham, Con) and the know-all interventions by Evan Harris (West Oxford and Abingdon, Lib Dem), were almost too much for me. I came home from work on the Wednesday relieved that I no longer had to endure another afternoon and night of such TV ghastliness.

But my personal aversion was as nothing compared with the impact that the decisions reached during these two days will have on our society for years to come. I had written previously that ‘This Bill is set to dismantle the fundamentals of human dignity, good medicine, family structure and even human life itself.’ Perhaps I had understated my case.

On the Monday, the debates were about human admixed embryos and saviour siblings. The topics for Tuesday were the need for a father and abortion. It is not my intention to analyse every jot and tittle of the proceedings – you can read them verbatim at:

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmhansrd.htm Nor is this the place to rehearse all the arguments, biblical and otherwise. Instead, I want to reflect on the damage done by just two days of Parliamentary business.

Human Admixed Embryos

There is something inherently distasteful about mixing genetic material from animals with that of human beings. The case against such endeavours can be made from the early chapters of Genesis and the *Do not mate different kinds of animals* of Leviticus 19:19. Such procedures were specifically banned by the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. Yet its like was deemed lawful via the so-called hamster test whereby the motility of human sperm, as a part of male infertility treatment, could be assessed by its ability to penetrate a hamster's ovum. Now in 2008, proponents of hybrid embryos argued that the creation of human admixed embryos has already been accepted because of this hamster test. But this hamster test dealt only with penetration, not fertilisation – no interspecies embryos were ever created by it.

Nevertheless, by the incontrovertible logic of the slippery slope, plus a little fudging of the facts, what could be so wrong with mixing human's and cow's genetic material and studying the resulting embryos for up to 14 days? And since the HFEA had already jumped the gun and granted two licences for this very work, there was little hope of rolling back those permissions. Incidentally, Gordon Brown had convinced himself that allowing the creation of human admixed embryos was an 'inherently moral endeavour'.

Ex-Tory minister, Edward Leigh (Gainsborough, Con) led the fight to outlaw the production of these interspecies embryos. He stated that the creation of such embryos was 'ethically wrong and almost certainly medically useless. We do not believe that regulation is enough. We believe this is a step too far and therefore should be banned. In embryos, we do have the genetic make-up of a complete human being and we could not and should not be spliced together with the animal kingdom.' Similarly, ex-Labour minister, Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton, Lab), asked, 'How far do you go? Where do you stop? If you permit the creation of hybrid embryos now, what will you seek to permit next time, even if you have no idea where it will lead?' The Leigh amendment was defeated by 336 to 176, as were two other similar ones, 286 to 223 and 314 to 181.

Saviour Siblings

The Bill allows the selection of embryos (produced by IVF and then tested by pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD)), which will be used to provide genetic material for a sick older brother or sister. Of course, as a consequence, all those embryos not fitting the required genetic criteria are destined for destruction.

The law already allows parents to use these procedures to select embryos genetically matching older siblings, but only when they have a possibly life-threatening disease, such as rare blood

disorders, like Fanconi or Diamond Blackfan anaemias. The significance of the current Bill was that saviour siblings would be created not only for these 'life-threatening', but also lesser 'serious' diseases.

David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate, Con, and member of Enfield Evangelical Free Church) presented his amendment opposing the wider use of saviour siblings, while at the same time championing the use of bioethically-uncontroversial treatments by way of umbilical cord blood stem cells. He emphasised that: 'We must keep hold of the important principle that a child should not be deliberately used or created for the benefit of another, no matter how pressing the need.' But his brave bid to ban such tissue typing was defeated by 342 to 163.

A further amendment, from shadow health secretary Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire, Con), which would have allowed tissue typing and sex selection only in cases where the other sibling was suffering a life-threatening illness, was defeated by 318 to 149, as was another related amendment, by 293 to 200.

We have been repeatedly told that early human embryos are just tiny little things, mere clumps of a few undifferentiated cells. And consider the suffering, of say, a five-year old boy with debilitating Diamond Blackfan anaemia. How can it be wrong to use such a biological dot to cure a big schoolboy? Or, how can it be wrong in a land, which already sanctions the abortion of a 24-week unborn child, to create purposefully and select and permit to live and then use a barely four-day-old embryo? How much have we been brainwashed by over-egged utilitarian hopes of curing Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, cancers, diabetes and so forth?

The Need for a Father

It is an irrefutable fact of life that each of us has a father and a mother. Nitty-gritty biology and the Bible tell us that ever since the post-Adamic generation we have all been the products of sperm plus ova. Furthermore, the God-ordained structure of a family is father-mother-child – a neat and wholesome threesome. Yet the abnormalities of IVF challenge this. Whereas sperm and egg are still required, the historic, conventional family configuration can now be defied – lesbian couples and single women can use IVF without the need for a father – they just need a sperm donor.

Iain Duncan-Smith, (Chingford and Woodford Green, Con), former leader of the Conservatives, spearheaded the attack against this assault on the natural order. The Bill wanted, prior to IVF treatment, the consideration of 'the need for a father' to be replaced by 'supportive parenting'. The former phrase may have been a clumsy afterthought in the 1990 Act, but its intention was admirable. The latter phrase is mere sociological piffle. The House bickered for three hours about fathers, mothers, role models, parenthood, and so on. In the end, it got nowhere and so-called 'equality' won the day – now, any and every grown-up can be a 'supportive parent'. The amendment was defeated by 292 to 217 and a related amendment was lost by 290 to 222.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire, Con) spoke for many when he stated: 'I have listened to this afternoon's debate with profound depression. When I entered this House in 1970, if somebody had told me that nearly 40 years thence, the House would debate the need for a father, I would have thought that that person had taken leave of his senses.'

This debate highlighted an inherent weakness within the law. The law can never define, even less produce, what we all want, namely, good parents. But that is no reason to stop aspiring to the ideal – why are we nowadays so enamoured with legislating for the mere mediocre, or even worse? Yet the erasing of fathers from the Statute Book sends out a dangerous message. It will confirm in the minds of many reluctant fathers that their role is unimportant, that parental obligations are for losers, that they can be less bothered about sowing their wild oats, and that the Child Support Agency will only half-heartedly pursue them. That is corrosive news for mothers and children, as well as fathers. How can the deliberate creation of fatherless children be a good idea?

Iris Robinson (Strangford, DUP) summed up this debate thus: 'Hon. Members can all breathe sighs of relief or indignation, but I am telling the House that the word of God says that procreation is through a man and a woman. We are moving mountains to facilitate immorality and to bring the rights of lesbians above all others in this country. It is a shame, and hon. Members ought to hang their heads in shame.' Sizzling Ulster and politically incorrect rhetoric it may be, but nevertheless it had a ring of truth.

Abortion

Of all the hot topics, this was the hottest. The question before the House was: Should the 24-week upper limit be reduced? This was the bell-weather issue for the pro-choice unreconstructed feminists as well as for the pro-life revisionists.

Nadine Dorries (Mid-Bedfordshire, Con) had clearly set out her stall weeks in advance. While not against abortion, she, as an ex-nurse, was appalled that we aborted babies who were viable. She led the troops in a battle for a 20-week limit. There was some expectation that a 22-week compromise might win the day. But all was lost – the status quo remains, and as a consequence, some 3,000 unborn babies of 20-24 weeks will lose their lives each year.

There was a series of lost amendments progressing from 12 weeks (393 to 71), 16 weeks (387 to 84), 20 weeks (332 to 190) through to 22 weeks (309 to 233). The size of the government's majorities was a surprise to most commentators.

Rod Liddle, writing in *The Spectator*, the day after the Parliamentary debate, added his typical attention-grabbing slant on events. He believed that: 'The Commons vote securing the 24-week limit is no more than a craven politician's fudge, designed to postpone the day when the law of the land finally catches up with the indisputable findings of science.' Furthermore, he recommended that the smart, young, unemployed victims of the credit crunch and the looming recession... should all retrain as abortionists, the abrupt termination of pregnancies being one of

Britain's most vibrant growth industries.' He continued: 'I may be wrong about this, but it strikes me that in a century or so, or maybe even less, we will be appalled that we allowed abortions at all. The advance of our knowledge about the life of a foetus, coupled with an improved ability to prevent conception, will mean that we will be mystified as to how such a primitive and brutal procedure could have become state-sanctioned and commonplace.' What fascinating, out-of-the-ordinary comments from a true 'right-on' Leftie.

What Next?

The Bill is not finished yet. Minor amendments were debated throughout June by a small Public Bill Committee of the House. The Report stage and Third reading, expected in mid-July, have now suddenly been postponed until October. Royal Assent is due by the end of the year.

Lessons to be Learned

1. We are a poor people. Our nation has reaffirmed itself as the world leader in horrible, unethical practices. No other country has such a callous attitude towards human life. No other country wilfully destroys so many human lives by abortion, IVF and embryo experimentation.
2. Parliament is unrepresentative. MPs exist to represent you and me, the electorate. While it is true that they voted on these issues according to their consciences, it is evident that their collective conscience is quite different from ours. Poll after poll showed that, for example, 60% of people were against the creation of human admixed embryos, 73% of women wanted an abortion limit of 20 weeks or less, 51% thought that saviour siblings denied a child a choice in how its body was used, and so on. OK, all such polls have flaws, but these did display a consistent majority stance, which the Parliamentary votes did not reflect.
3. The Church is weak. We are informed that there are one million evangelical Christians in our land. Where were they? I have been told that some met with or wrote to their MPs. Good for them, I say. There were several online petitions to sign. Nadine Dorries' scraped up a meagre 8,000 signatures, while the much-publicised Alive & Kicking Campaign managed just 30,000, rather than the hoped for 100,000. Surely there can be few things simpler than signing a petition. Yes, I know, the sophisticates say that petitions are a waste of time, and presumably they do not have even two minutes to spare. But would a petition of a quarter of a million have created a decent stir?
4. Evangelicals are confused. Three Roman Catholic Cabinet ministers – Ruth Kelly, Des Browne and Paul Murphy – when present, voted for all the pro-life amendments. It is sad to record that Stephen Timms (East Ham, Lab), the evangelical Minister of State for Employment and Welfare Reform at the Department for Work and Pensions, apparently has no such bioethical backbone because he voted on every occasion with the government. He could not even find it in his heart to vote for 22 weeks.

5. Evangelicals are lax. Of all people, evangelicals should understand these issues and be in the vanguard as salt and light. I applaud the work of the Christian Institute, the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship and the Christian Medical Fellowship during this campaign. But where, for instance, were the literature and galvanising from CARE or LIFE? They certainly did not come through my front door or via my computer screen. There were bold statements from the Roman Catholic hierarchy, but I saw virtually nothing from evangelical denominations, colleges, publishers and others. Some complained of 'campaign fatigue' – they must be unwell Christians rather than just tired and weak ones.

6. It is back to basics. These issues are unlikely to come before Parliament again for several years. The interim hope is that the next General Election, which must occur before May 2010, will return a more pro-life House of Commons. However, that is an unpredictable hope. We need a hope that is more substantial. Nothing much is going to change until people change – until dull heads and stony hearts are given new life, new understanding and new direction. So, it's back to the gospel. What we must have is more effective evangelism, heartfelt repentance, better preaching, plus a clearer prophetic voice. And what we truly need is the blessing and enabling of God Almighty.

'Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed' (Psalm 119: 136).

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