

The new Know-Nothings: US House votes to outlaw therapeutic cloning

Patrick Martin
7 August 2001

The July 31 vote by the House of Representatives to ban human cloning, even in the form of cloning embryos to produce stem cells for medical research, was an action which combined pandering to religious superstition and an irrational fear of scientific progress.

By a vote of 265 to 162, the House passed the bill introduced by David Weldon, a Florida Republican, after voting down, by 251 to 176, a more limited ban proposed by Pennsylvania Republican James Greenwood. Sixty-three Democrats and two independents joined 200 Republicans to pass the legislation, which had the support of the Bush administration.

Both the Weldon and the Greenwood bills would ban the cloning of human embryos for reproductive purposes—to create babies which are genetic copies of other human beings. The bills took opposite stands on the cloning of embryos for the purposes of medical research, including the production of stem cells. The Weldon bill prohibits such therapeutic cloning, with penalties of up to 10 years in prison and a \$1 million fine, while the Greenwood bill would license it under federal regulation.

Given the present state of biotechnology, the ban on reproductive cloning is superfluous, because cloning techniques are not nearly reliable enough for such a purpose, and may not be for decades. It was included in the bill to allow supporters to make rhetorical condemnations of the supposed imminence of Frankenstein monsters to cover their main purpose, which is to halt therapeutic cloning and thus smuggle in a ban on stem cell research through the back door.

Cloning techniques are essential for the development of stem cell-based medical research for two reasons: cloning provides a more stable source of embryo tissue for stem cell extraction than using donated embryos; and cloning makes it possible to eliminate the problem of rejection in patients receiving stem cell tissue, since the stem cells can be developed by cloning from the patients' own skin, and thus will "fit" them genetically.

The Bush administration is now considering proposals to

lift, maintain or strengthen the current limits on federal funding of most stem cell research. More than 200 members of the House of Representatives and 59 senators have sent letters to the White House supporting federal funding for stem cell research. On July 30, the day before the cloning vote, House Speaker Dennis Hastert announced he would oppose such funding.

The anti-cloning bill goes far beyond this limitation on federal funding, effectively criminalizing this whole area of scientific endeavor. A Massachusetts company, Advanced Cell Technology, announced last month it would begin cloning human embryos as part of an effort to develop stem cell lines related to research into cures for Parkinson's and other diseases. This would be outlawed under the legislation.

The House bill not only bans such research and the development of new medicines based on stem cells, it prohibits the importation into the United States of any medicines developed internationally through such biotechnology research. In other words, if scientists in France, Britain or Japan were to develop treatments for deadly diseases, including cures for forms of cancer, now hoped for from stem cell research, the witch doctors on Capitol Hill would outlaw them.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine issued a strong condemnation of the Weldon bill, saying it "prohibits American scientists from discovering potential cures for diseases like diabetes, Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injury. If other countries discover these cures, the Weldon bill would make it illegal for American patients to use them."

During the six-hour debate which preceded the vote, several congressmen supporting stem cell research warned that the legislation was being rushed through on the basis of ignorance and hysteria. Louise Slaughter (D-NY) said, "It's Congress playing scientist. We're in deep water here."

James Greenwood, sponsor of the opposing measure, said, "This is cellular nuclear science, and there's almost no one of the 435 members here who understands this." The Weldon bill was "flat-earth kind of thinking," he charged.

“It has no basis in science, and it’s not compassionate.”

The Pennsylvania Republican declared that the supporters of the Weldon bill were blatantly violating the constitutional separation of church and state by translating their religious beliefs directly into law. “I am not prepared as a politician to stand on the floor of the House and say: ‘I’ve got a philosophical reason, probably stemming from my religion, that makes me say, you cannot go there, science, because it violates my religious belief.’”

Particularly significant in the House vote was the position of Bernard Sanders, the independent congressman from Vermont who calls himself a socialist and generally votes with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Sanders formed an alliance in support of the Weldon bill with House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, the principal leader of the Republican right wing.

Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, a far-right Republican who has introduced similar anti-cloning legislation in the upper house, hailed the potential for a “left-right coalition” that would bring together Christian fundamentalists and those opposed to genetic engineering on ecological grounds. “We’re building a strong coalition with the Green Party people, folks who supported the Nader candidacy,” Brownback told the *Washington Post*. “That’s starting to come together more and more.”

DeLay himself made a deliberate appeal to “green” sentiments in his speech on the House floor supporting the Weldon bill. Condemning therapeutic cloning, he declared, “This technique would reduce some human beings to the level of an industrial commodity. Cloning treats human embryos—the basic elements of life itself—as a simple raw material. This exploitative, unholy technique is no better than medical strip mining.”

These remarks are a combination of cynical demagoguery and crass ignorance. The inherent logic of the capitalist system, as Karl Marx long ago explained, is to transform every aspect of human life into a commodity. DeLay is an inveterate supporter of this process.

He opposes any form of government restriction on the pursuit of profits by strip mining companies, environmental polluters and exploiters of low-wage and child labor. He supports Bush’s plans to privatize public education and Social Security—what one might call, to use his terminology, educational and pension “strip mining.”

It is only when the profit interests of the biotechnology companies come into conflict with the taboos of Christian fundamentalism that DeLay suddenly discovers the exploitation which is the essence of capitalism.

DeLay’s newfound ally Bernard Sanders is a supporter of stem cell research, but nonetheless supported a bill which will make much of the work in this field impossible or

fruitless. A statement issued by his office declared, “I have very serious concerns about the long-term goals of an increasingly powerful and profit-motivated biotechnology industry.”

Such concerns are legitimate, but to form a political alliance with the extreme right of the Republican Party on this basis is unprincipled and reactionary. The American Greens, like their counterparts in Europe, respond to the ecological dangers posed by anarchic and unplanned capitalist economic development by placing the blame, not on the profit system—which they accept and defend—but on science and technology. Despite his lip service to socialism, Sanders is following a similar path.

The Vermont “progressive” has joined forces with Christian fundamentalists and semi-fascist elements in a devil’s bargain directed against science and the extension of human knowledge. A legal ban on biotech research will have little effect on corporate profits, despite Sanders’ rhetoric. But it is a serious blow against freedom of thought and strengthens the anti-democratic forces in American political life, which intervened so blatantly to overturn the popular will in the 2000 elections.

Socialism has nothing in common with right-wing populist demagoguery, or with appeals to anti-scientific prejudices. Genuine socialists seek to put an end to the pernicious influence of profit over scientific research, not by suppressing research, but by placing industry under public ownership and democratic control.

This means making the case for the nationalization of the biotechnology industry—an industry, in any case, which is entirely beholden to the state for research and funding, as the controversy over federal funding of stem cell research has already demonstrated. It is part of the struggle to build an independent political movement of the working class against both the Republican and Democratic parties, and the profit system as a whole.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact