

PERSONAL

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

SIR ROBIN NICHOLSON

Mr. Enoch Powell's Unborn Children (Protection)
Bill

The Prime Minister was grateful for your minute of 11 February about research on human embryos.

The Prime Minister believes that the argument in paragraph 3 suffers from a touch of casuistry. She is by no means sure that your description of fertilisation would command wide support, and she remains personally less than convinced of the case for research on human embryos.

I should stress that these are the Prime Minister's personal views, and they are conveyed for your personal information.

DmB

13 February 1985

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Prime Minister⁽²⁾: To note. These points are really for the next stage of the Government's response

W.0124

11 February 1985
to Warnock. Mr Fowler will circulate proposals once consultation is complete.

PRIME MINISTER

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MR ENOCH POWELL'S UNBORN CHILDREN (PROTECTION) BILL

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Mr Powell's Bill, due for its second reading on 15 February, seeks to prevent all research using human embryos.

2. The Powell Bill, even if it does not succeed, will of course be opinion-forming and could influence the fate of the more comprehensive Bill being drafted by DHSS, following up the Warnock Report on Human Fertilisation and Embryology. Research on human embryos is an area where lack of public understanding of the issues involved leads to a number of misapprehensions. I believe that the Government would be open to criticism if it did not (a) attempt to clarify the issues involved, and (b) stress the importance to medical research of allowing embryo experimentation to continue. The decision by H Committee that the Government spokesman in the debate should state clearly the case for embryo research is consistent with the second point.

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3. Arguments used against the Warnock recommendations centre around questions such as the sanctity of life and protection of the individual. They lead to claims that the embryo should be protected from the moment of conception, and thus that no experimentation should be allowed. But it is erroneous to argue that life begins at conception. The sperm and eggs are living cells, already alive in advance of fertilisation. All that can be said is that fertilisation brings into existence a genetically novel kind of cell, and that this cell has the potential, if it is successfully implanted in the lining of the womb (at around 14 days), for becoming a human individual. It does not have that potential if it is not implanted; the majority of embryos do not implant, and are rejected naturally. Implantation is also prevented by commonly-used forms of contraception (provided by the National Health Service). The 14-day limit proposed by Warnock, for

A touch of Casuistry here, I think. I agree. Dub 11/2

keeping an embryo for experimental purposes, relates:

(a) to the stage of implantation; (b) the stage before which it is still uncertain whether an embryo will divide into one or more individuals, ie before true individual development begins; and (c) the stage before which the rudiments of a nervous system have been laid down. It seems unlikely that many of those who sign petitions against embryo experimentation would do so if some of these basic biological facts were known to them.

4. The following advances are believed to be attainable if experimentation on early embryos is allowed:

- (a) improved infertility treatment and fertility control;
- (b) prevention or correction of genetic defects in embryos;
- (c) improved understanding of cellular and developmental processes and hence understanding of inherited genetic disease and perhaps also causes of cancer.

5. It would be tragic if unjustified controls prevented this country from retaining the lead in yet another area of research where it has done the pioneering work. Research of this kind has great potential for social benefit, and I believe that it is important that the Government should say so. An outcome that prevented embryo research would be quite inconsistent with existing practices in the NHS provision of contraception, let alone abortion.

6. I am copying this minute to Sir Robert Armstrong.

RBN

ROBIN NICHOLSON

Cabinet Office
11 February 1985