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A Need for Caution

I have always taken the pro-life stance in the abortion debate because I believe that a human being is conceived at the point when a sperm fertilizes an egg. My pro-life beliefs are based on that understanding and the value I place on human life. However not all moral issues are as clear-cut, sometimes becoming even more complex the closer I look at them.

So is the case with Senate Bill 160, which has been dubbed the “anti-cloning bill.” But in addition to outlawing the cloning of a person, the bill also makes impossible a procedure known as somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT), which uses a nucleus extracted from a human egg. Many, including scientists, researchers and otherwise conservative individuals, contend that further research using the SCNT process could lead to cures for diseases and paralysis.

There is no male fertilization in SCNT; the clusters of cells are human, but they are not human beings. Because SCNT does not create human life, our governor, who is a firm advocate for the pro-life movement, has voiced that the procedure should not be banned. If the bill makes it out of the legislature, Governor Blunt has declared he would veto it because it criminalizes therapeutic stem-cell research.

In my eyes, human or animal cloning should be illegal. But I don’t fully understand the issues that lie beneath the surface of the issues other than cloning actual living beings. Some lawmakers have put this bill at the top of their legislative priorities, and because of that, the legislature is now in the middle of a moral and political dilemma. How we handle this problem could be the difference between a downfall and a buttress for the pro-life majority.

We have worked so hard to defend the right to life and have finally elected a governor who shares our desire to protect the rights of unborn children. This bill sets pro-life legislators and our governor against themselves and one another. And until last week, SB 160 seemed to be on a fast track through the legislative process. But the rapid pace must be slowed down because we have yet to establish a middle ground between parties involved. If more effective communication does not begin, we will be handing a bill to the governor that he will be forced to veto. Also, the bill's sponsor will then push for a veto override, which would hurt the legislature's relationship with our head of state and further cause dismay for the pro-life platform.

Although I co-sponsored this bill, I hesitate to offer it my full-blown endorsement because before the language of SB 160 was written, we were lined up and led astray. I have spoken with a few pro-life advocates who didn't understand why so many legislators are proceeding with caution on this matter. I explained that because of the wide ranges of beliefs, many of us are hesitant to speak out about it in fear of alienating friends and allies. Those pro-life supporters took a closer look at the big *and* little details of SCNT and no longer believe this issue to be a straightforward moral decision. They, like many, are torn between supporting the bill because though it would protect cells that will probably never be a child, it would ban a procedure that could potentially improve or save the life of someone already living.

I might have signed on to this bill, but I do not want it to be shoved through the legislative process before we can agree on certain areas, just like we do for every other important issue that passes through. I am not willing to let this issue ruin what we have worked so hard to achieve for more than a decade. This is not a simple "yes" or "no" issue, so I will do everything I can to encourage a long, thorough and deliberate debate on every aspect of this bill to come up with language that the majority can agree on.

On a different, non-controversial matter, MoDOT recently hosted the first of two meetings in which transportation projects were prioritized. The problems with Route 71, as well as the intersection at Highways 60 and 37, made the initial list. I will be meeting with MoDOT staff sometime in the near future to discuss the problems in depth to ensure that they get fixed as soon as possible. I will keep you up-to-date on the status of these transportation projects.

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Sen. Larry Gene Taylor represents the people of Ozark, Stone, Taney, Lawrence, Barry and McDonald counties.