

Outspoken critic of HFE Bill to meet scientists

Thomas Norton

CARDINAL KEITH O'Brien is to explain to scientists the Church's opposition to controversial research into human-animal embryos and laws concerning the rights of children.

The Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh was among the most acerbic critics of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology (HFE) Bill, condemning aspects of it as "monstrous" in his Easter sermon.

Last week, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said there would be a free vote for Labour MPs on three contentious areas of the bill: the proposed creation of human-animal "admixed" embryos; removing the need for a father for children of same-sex couples and single women undergoing IVF treatment; and the creation of "saviour siblings".

However, developments in science have already overtaken parliamentary legislation, it emerged this week, with the creation of human-animal embryos at Newcastle University. The embryos, which survived for three days, were made by removing the nucleus from the egg of a cow and injecting human DNA in its place. In the future stem cells are to be harvested from such embryos and used for research into diseases such as Parkinson's and diabetes. It is illegal to allow them to survive for more than two weeks.

Speaking earlier at a public meeting at St

Bryce Kirk in Kirkcaldy – where Gordon Brown's father had preached – Cardinal O'Brien said he had been approached about a meeting with leading scientists to discuss such research. "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," he said.

The invitation came from the Catholic Labour MP Jim Devine, who is in favour of the bill. He said he was "delighted" by the cardinal's response and proposed the meeting take place on 22 April.

Cardinal O'Brien continued: "In agreeing to such a meeting my only condition would be that scientists were also willing to accept instruction from our Churches and people of faith on basic morality, on what human life really is, on the purpose of our life on earth."

He said that he would also put the case for the creation of a permanent national bioethics commission to inform public debate about complex ethical questions.

Meanwhile, one of the country's leading Catholic scientists, Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, chief executive of the Medical Research Council was confident that the bill had "got the balance right". He said that it was "right and proper" that there be dissent in a large organisation such as the Catholic Church, but added: "I've looked very carefully at the bill and I don't find a conflict of conscience at all."

Church boycotts rights document

THE IRISH Church has boycotted the launch of Northern Ireland's new Bill of Rights because it says the draft document ignores the rights of the unborn, *writes Paul Keenan*.

The Church's representative to the Human Rights Forum that drew up the bill, Fr Tim Bartlett, refused to attend the launch. "I regard it as having failed in its very purpose," he said. "It is clear that the forum report will not even recognise, let alone provide, protection for the most vulnerable in our society."

Fr Bartlett's comments were echoed by a spokesman for the Democratic Unionist Party. "Trees have more rights in this document than the unborn child," said Northern Ireland Assembly member Simon Hamilton.

Though abortion is strictly limited in

Northern Ireland, with access only allowed if the continuing pregnancy would damage the health of the woman, the Church wants this enshrined in the bill to protect against future attempts to change the legislation.

The forum represents the main political parties and different sectors of society, including Churches. It was established to draw up the bill following commitments made within the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement in 2006.

The Church's boycott came as the authors of the draft bill conceded there was no consensus on any of its main proposals to ensure human rights for all. The Church's criticism coupled with the overall lack of consensus throw into doubt the future of the enterprise.

IN BRIEF

Iraq visit

Bishop William Kenney will next week visit the Christian community in the Erbil area in northern Iraq in the aftermath of the killing of the Chaldean Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho in Mosul. Bishop Kenney, an auxiliary in Birmingham, has been to Iraq on several other occasions and said that he was looking forward to the trip. "The security doesn't really worry me," he said. "I've discovered it's important to show solidarity; it really means a lot to locals that the Church hasn't forgotten them."

Rent hike closes school

A decision by the Daughters of Wisdom in Newcastle to triple the rent payable by the £3,000-a-term La Sagasse School has forced the institution's closure. Governors at La Sagasse said that they had no choice but to close the school because of falling pupil numbers and the new "untenable" rent demand. The closure leaves more than 200 pupils searching for new schools and 44 staff seeking work. The sisters defended their decision, saying: "We have been subsidising the school for many years but we have financial obligations and responsibilities to help our communities in developing countries."

New bishop for Lancaster

Bishop Michael Campbell was ordained in St Peter's Cathedral, Lancaster this week, at a service attended by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, Cardinal Keith O'Brien and 32 bishops. The new bishop, who will serve as co-adjutor to Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue in Lancaster, was the first Augustinian to be episcopally ordained in England since the Reformation.

Force loses top Catholic officer

Northern Ireland's most senior Catholic police officer has stepped down to become chief executive of Co-operation Ireland, which seeks to promote better relations between people on either side of the border. Assistant chief constable Peter Sheridan was considered a possible successor to Sir Hugh Orde as chief constable. In Northern Ireland 24 per cent of the police service is now Catholic, with 50 per cent of all new recruits coming from the Catholic community. Mr Sheridan said that he hoped for a time when there was no need actively to recruit equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants.

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